神様のメモ帳4
杉井 光
イラスト＊岸田メル
電撃文庫

Novel Illustrations

9784048679107

1920193006100

ISBN978-4-04-867910-7
C0193 ¥610E

ASCII MEDIA WORKS
発行● アスキー・メディアワークス
定価: 本体 610 円
※消費税が別に加算されます

杉井 光（すぎい ひかる）

1978年、東京生まれ。池袋に引っ越してきてから、心の潤いを求めて楽器やDTM機材を次々と買いそろえているが、写真を撮ってブログに載せるだけで満足して、早くも埃が積もり始めている。電子ピアノが鍵盤カバーつきでよかったと安堵しきり。

【電撃文庫作品】

火目の巫女
火目の巫女 巻ノ二
火目の巫女 巻ノ三
神様のメモ帳
神様のメモ帳2
神様のメモ帳3
神様のメモ帳4
さよならピアノソナタ
さよならピアノソナタ2
さよならピアノソナタ3
さよならピアノソナタ4

イラスト：岸田メル（きしだ）

1983年生まれ、名古屋在住。好きな食べ物はラーメン。好きな飲み物は水。趣味は教育テレビを見ること。絵を描いてるときもずっと見てます。ホームページは http://maigo.jp/

カバー／加藤製版印刷

神様のメモ帳4

あの男が戻ってきた——四代目率いる不良少年チーム・平坂組の、もう一人の創設者、平坂。

折しも四代目は音楽イベントの運営に乗り出し、夏休み中の僕もその手伝いに駆り出される。しかし平坂の指示で動く不良たちが次々に妨害工作をしかけ、やがて平坂組との全面対決に突入する。

四代目は平坂との間になにがあったのかも語らず、僕らの協力を突っぱね、かつての友とひとりで戦おうとする。

「四代目は間違っている。ぼくは今、探偵の禁を犯す」——ニート探偵アリスがえぐり出す、五年前の悲劇の真実とは？

白熱のニートティーン・ストーリー、第4弾！

す-9-11
電撃文庫
610

神様のメモ帳4

杉井 光

神様のメモ帳4

杉井 光
イラスト❋岸田メル

Characters

ミシさん

ニート探偵事務所があるビルの1階に店を構えるラーメンはなまる店主。アリスはじめニート探偵団の面々を生温かい目で見守っている。

彩夏

ナルミのクラスメイト。とある事件で重傷を負い、記憶を失ったものの生還を果たす。明るく素直な性格だが、どこかずれてるところも。

平坂組 Hirasaka-gumi

いまどき任侠を気取る不良少年グループ。しかしその実力は侮れない。

四代目

平坂組リーダー。冷徹な性格だが、趣味特技が手芸という隠れた一面も。ナルミと義兄弟の杯を交わしている。

電柱

平坂組、四代目麾下のツートップその1。組の中では縦幅最大。

岩男

平坂組、四代目麾下のツートップその2。組の中では横幅最大。

アリス Alice

ひきこもりの自称《ニート探偵》。PCとぬいぐるみで溢れた自室で、ネットを駆使して真実を暴きだす。普段はいつもパジャマを着て、栄養の大半をドクターペッパーから摂取している。

藤島 鳴海 Narumi

本作の主人公。転校を繰り返し人付き合いを避けるようになっていたが、とある事件をきっかけにアリスの助手となる。なにごとにもやる気がなさげなニート予備軍だが、口八丁だけは一人前。

ニート探偵団 NEET Detectives

アリスのもとで合法・非合法を問わず捜索活動をするニートな野郎ども。

テツ先輩

元ボクサーで荒事にたけた武闘派。その一方、パチスロや競馬などに精を出すギャンブル狂。

ヒロさん

女のもとを渡り歩くヒモ。卓越した話術でたくみに情報を引き出す（ただし対女子限定）。

少佐

童顔で小学生にも見えかねない外見をしているが、盗聴・盗撮・爆発物のエキスパート。

Designed by Toru Suzuki

ALICE&
AYAKA

Farewell, red-haired alien. Put in lots of love in the rocket that you made— “Rocket Dive” hide/ Hotei Tomoyasu

Chapter 1

When a long-awaited client arrived at the agency, I was having a fierce battle with Alice, and thus did not notice anyone enter.

”You actually wished to bathe my good friends, causing them to suffer the third-most cruelest method of torture in this world! Though I have long known that you are a cold, unjust person, I never thought that it was actually serious till this extent!”

Standing on her bed in the six tsubo room, Alice looked just like Nio as her luscious hair that was like black honey fluttered, while her skin so white that it looked sickly was slightly flushed in anger. Teddy bears, dolphins, kittens, and large quantities of other dolls were collapsed on the sheets. The reason that she was so agitated was just because I asked her if I should wash the dolls. Though she is a self-proclaimed detective, always speaking a huge ton of principles, actually, her personality is as her appearance suggests, that of a vexatious little girl.

”Then what about the second and the first?”

If I seriously answer her complaints, I might continue to be terribly scolded, so I directly changed the topic.

”The second-most cruelest thing to endure is to answer questions by foolish people. The cruelest thing would be to endure the fact that the foolish person is actually my assistant!”

”Alright, I’m sorry. So that you won’t suffer anymore, I’ll just take the ice cream that Min-san made back.”

”Why didn’t you say so earlier.” Alice jumped down from the bed and ran towards me. “You actually kept silent all this time, how despicable.”

”Is this really okay? Min-san said *’Alice will happily dash down from the bed if you use ice cream as bait, and you can use that opportunity to take the dolls and the sheets’*. It really turned out as she said.”

”MMNNNNNNNN!”

Alice sat at the edge of the bed, shaking her legs repeatedly while gnashing her teeth. Taking that chance, I placed the cup containing the ice cream into the fridge, taking out a can of Dr. Pepper by the way.

”In any case, my good friends and the sheets are not dirty at all. Look, they are as new as the moon when it was first born.”

”It indeed appears to be so, but since it’s almost summer now, you probably sweated when you were sleeping.”

”If you really don’t believe it, just sniff it and you’ll see.”

I almost dropped the Dr. Pepper that I was about to open onto the floor.

”No…… Wait a minute, what are you talking about?”

”You’re the one who said that they’re dirty, so you have the obligation to prove that they are dirty. Hurry up and prove it!”

Alice stepped on my thigh as I was coincidentally kneeling before the sheets to prevent me from escaping and shoved a huge teddy bear into my face.

”S- Stop that!”

”Just say it, how does it smell like?”

I really couldn’t say something like *’It smells like Alice’*. As I fell on my back in near suffocation, my gaze met the sharp, wolf-like eyes above me.

”What the heck are you doing?”

”—Yondaime?”

I immediately sprang up. As the speed when I raised my knees while standing up was too fast, I accidentally toppled Alice, causing her to protest loudly, but I really didn’t have the time to care.

”W- W- When did you arrive? When did you start watching us?”

I couldn’t help but kneel down in front of Yondaime. The leader of the young yakuza gang was clad in clothes for the summer— black, webbed vest on his upper torso that showed skin, and a pair of painted loose denim pants.

”Probably from the time you started to sniff the sheets.”

”I did not sniff the sheets!”

”Though I am not sure what you two are here for, I welcome you to help chase the fussy assistant before me away.” Alice sat on the sheets once again. Two? I turned my attention behind Yondaime and saw a person with slightly dyed hair smiling at me with his pearly teeth.

”Even Hiro-san is here. Y- You saw it as well?”

”Ahh— Yes.”

With a wry smile on his face, Hiro-san walked to Yondaime’s side. He was wearing clothes with a daring style as well, with a chili red T-shirt and a dazzling gold necklace on his neck that would make anyone think that he’s a gigolo on first sight.

”It seemed like you were having fun, so we didn’t want to disturb you.”

”If it seemed so fun, please change places with me!”

”But isn’t that Narumi-kun’s privilege?” What kind of privilege is that! I have to worry about Alice’s baths, wash her clothes, feed her and so on. I would have quit long ago if I could!

”Just sniffing it doesn’t really matter, but washing my clothes is a definite no. Hiro, it’s the same for you!”

”Erm…… Alice, that isn’t so……”

Hiro-san approached the bed by my side, squatting down by Alice.

”I suggest you don’t let Narumi-kun sniff even the smell of yourself.”

What is this guy talking about? From just now, Yondaime’s gaze that was fierce like that of a wild wolf, and was narrowed so much that it almost pierced through my face. Can we please not continue to discuss this topic?

”Why not? Narumi is already so slow that I cannot let him comprehend with words. What I mean is that I wish to turn the words that I wish to speak of into data, uploading it into his brain after connecting a USB cable to his nostrils.”

”No, think about it. Aren’t the pajamas and sheets things that Alice is always in contact with?”

”Uh huh?”

”So aren’t the dolls like another part of Alice as well?”

”So what?”

”How will you feel if you let Narumi-kun sniff the smell of your skin directly?”

I was completely speechless, while Alice’s face underwent different shades of red, and had the vibrance of a red chili in the end.

”Narumi! You shameless fellow!”

’The shameless one should be you!” And you only realized that after people explained it so clearly to you!?

When I retorted, I was immediately assaulted with numerous cans of Dr. Pepper. Unable to face the attack, I had no other choice but to hide behind Yondaime. Having supernatural reflexes, the wolf slammed all the empty cans away with only one hand.

”Stop playing the fool. Hiro, don’t start a lesson of morals and ethics at this time. I am here for official business.”

”Ahhh, that’s right, I almost forgot.”

Hiro-san answered while pressing on Alice's shoulder with his hand…… Official business?

"It's best if it is serious work!" Alice spoke in a furious tone. Steam almost puffed out from her face. "Please continue after chasing that shameless rogue out of my office!"

Why am I scolded to this extent……?

"That's fine. Yondaime said that he wants to borrow Narumi-kun for awhile. It might take up the whole summer vacation."

The steam suddenly disappeared from Alice's face without a trace, while her dancing black hair drooped on the sheets as well.

"…… You wish to borrow Narumi? Why?"

"I spoke of this to you before this. I accepted the job of doing promotion for an indie band."

Yondaime forcefully pushed me aside and walked into the bedroom to explain.

"At the end of August, they will have a few continuous concerts in Tokyo."

"Ahh…… Would it be that band? I can't remember the name for now, but it should be the one whose members are all girls."

I couldn't help but interrupt.

"See, Narumi-kun indeed knows of it as well." Hiro-san approached me. "There are already quite a lot of people discussing this band on the internet now."

I often saw the Mad Movie[1] that was released as a promotional video on the official website, but since I never heard of the original songs in the first place, it's really nothing to boast of.

"…… Are you referring to this?"

Alice's fingers moved quickly on the keyboard, showing the results

of her search on one of the monitors that covered the walls. As expected of the NEET detective who holds the massive amount of information floating in the internet sea in her weak hands, she's absolutely unbeatable if she's in an online state. I think I watched the video played as well. It was a pv that gave a deep impression to the people viewing it. The female lead singer was strumming a black Gibson Les Paul guitar in the video.

"I never thought that Yondaime would actually accept jobs in the entertainment industry as well. What in the world is happening?"

"Stop talking as if I work because of my interests. This is business."

Yondaime crossed his arms in displeasure, ramming the back of his head into the wall.

"We can't earn our livings just by being a delinquent. It'll be over if we don't expand our business. I've started a new company for event coordination, and I'm going to use this as a stepping stone."

I couldn't help but start to listen closely. Yondaime is the king of the NEETs in this city, but his true identity is that of a true businessman.

"The guys in our gang are completely useless in matters like this, so it's not enough when I am doing this alone. I'm directly borrowing Hiro, but since the Gardening Club kid is Alice's only assistant, I'd still have to ask."

"Well, I understand the reason that you're borrowing Hiro-san for, but why are you using me as well?"

Hiro-san is really good at coping with girls. If Yondaime wishes to promote the indie band by word, Hiro-san would be the prime candidate. But what about me?

"I'm thinking of doing promotion using the internet and contact with DJs, but there aren't any other people I know that are good in this."

"Oh, so that's why you're here?"

Indeed, I'm slightly more knowledgeable about public culture. Though there is no match for Alice on the internet, the fact that she doesn't have any enemies means that she doesn't have any companions as well. The only person left would be me.

"Does that mean that you wish to dispatch Narumi to various places during the whole summer break?"

"That's the main gist of it."

"Don't joke with me, who will do the chores in my office then?"

Didn't you just ask people to chase or kick me out of here?

"It isn't like he wouldn't come back. Wouldn't he still be your assistant when school starts?"

"Uuuu……"

It feels like Alice isn't that quick-witted today, as her opponent kept getting the upper hand.

"Why must you use both Hiro and Narumi? Is it not just an indie band? Even if there is not too much funds, don't they know any cheap event coordinators?"

"The event this time will definitely be a hit, so I'm hoping that a veteran won't barge in from the start, and let us handle all the promotions."

Hearing such forceful statements, Hiro-san and I couldn't help but stare at Yondaime's face. Though his lips were tightly closed while his eyes were narrowed in a line as usual, it was like there were transparent flames surrounding him, dazzling all of us.

"Why are you so certain that they will be a hit?" Alice asked with her brows furrowed while shaking her head.

"You'll know when you listen to them. Not the music played on the net, but the recording of a live concert rehearsal."

After saying that, Yondaime immediately took out something from

his pocket and tossed it to Alice. As the sports skills of the girl was equal to zero, of course it's impossible for her to catch it. Thus, the tiny object hammered on her forehead, dropping onto a pile of dolls after that— it was a USB stick.

"Barbarian! Why did you not just hand it to me?" Alice furiously plugged in the USB stick.

It was not until that moment that day that I noticed the speakers and amplifiers installed in the NEET Detective Agency. When the room was filled with pink noise that was like hot steam, I noticed two huge sound sources at the two sides of the walls covered with black machines. What followed was the strong feedback of the resonance between a Les Paul electric guitar and the Marshal amplifiers.

A feeling as though one was beaten up by music— such a thing really did exist.

There were vibrations that felt as though they were going to gorge out one's heart. Unclear mumblings turned into dream-like prayers, the singing voice dashed in a vast, endless wilderness. A guitar riff that was cruel at times, and sweetly cuts one's flesh and body at times.

The music that overwhelmed me that time was something like that.

It was just after noon when Yondaime, Hiro-san and I walked out of the detective agency. The burning sun of the early summer mercilessly roasted the roads between the long buildings.

"Haven't you planned an outdoor concert or the like? It seems like this summer will have a strong feeling of summer."

Hiro-san turned around to ask Yondaime while walking down the emergency backstairs.

"Where can we plan them?"

"At the Hibiya theatre, perhaps?"

”Isn’t it a bit too late to reserve the Hibiya theatre?”

The Hibiya Outdoors Theatre is a sacred ground for outdoor concerts. However, since it is only open to the public on weekends, the reservation schedule is so full that we can only use it next year if we book it now.

”Hmmm, that’s a pity. The band really is—“

Hiro-san muttered in a singsong voice.

”Wish I could hear it outdoors…… It would be exhilarating.”

I somewhat understood what Hiro-san meant. Being immersed in that song with our backs to the sun of real summer that has the color of fresh blood, it would probably be a whole three days before we could return to reality. And I finally understood why Yondaime was so resolute about this as well.

Besides, even Alice fell into a silence after listening to the recording of the rehearsal, agreeing to rent me out after that.

The song is the real thing.

”I will be responsible if it is not successful.”

Yondaime shifted his gaze opposite to the railings. They were not words that one can easily speak of.

After that, we walked to the empty space between the buildings below the emergency backstairs and started a tactical meeting after sitting on the beer crates, old tires and gas tanks surrounding a decaying wooden stand. Large amount of steam because of the simmering ramen soup puffed out of the kitchen backdoor, causing the surroundings to become slightly hot and blurry. The summer heat was really overwhelming.

”There is one other thing that I didn’t mention to Alice just now,” Yondaime’s tone suddenly turned heavy. “…… We caught a whiff of dispute. It’s very possible that conflicts will happen.”

”Why?”

”The job was originally taken by other event coordinators, a rotten organization supported by a yakuza gang known as Yanagihara-kai. As they were sloppy with their work, the head of the band broke the contract in a rage and brought the case to me.”

Whoa! That wouldn’t just be a whiff of dispute, the thick smoke of battle could already be felt.

”Among the venues that we reserved, one of them can’t be used now. It seems like they’re deliberately looking for trouble.”

”Is that really okay? The flames of battle are already lit.”

”Though Yanagihara-kai isn’t getting involved personally, the situation is still rather unfavorable. That’s why I’m giving you the request.”

Which means, the detective will have to get involved in the most critical moment, is that so?

”If so, won’t telling Alice from the start be more appropriate?”

”If I really did that— disregard Hiro for the moment, it is largely probable that she won’t let me borrow you. That girl worries too much, after all.”

Would she really be that worried? But since the yakuza is involved this time as well, it indeed feels somewhat dangerous……

”I’m not really suited for a job like this as well, but it doesn’t seem like you’re worried about me.”

”No one will be worried of you or have expectations of you. A gigolo should just do as a gigolo does.”

”Fine, fine. Then I’ll just have to poke around for news at the clubs nearby as usual, right?”

”There will be no need for that. You don’t need to go to the shops. Just go look for any woman to find out information. We aren’t clear which type of people knows about the band yet.”

”Oi oi, you’re still at this level though there’s only two months left? Aren’t they going to release an album as well?”

”Didn’t I tell you that I accepted the case recently? It can’t be helped!”

”Erm…… Then what about me?” I couldn’t speak up because of the rapid-fire conversation of the two, so I could only interrupt weakly. Yondaime glared at me.

”Go search for people similar to DJs who have their own websites or are doing a web radio.”

”Seems to be a refined, exhausting job……”

”Let’s talk about your payment before this…… Would a monthly salary be okay?”

”Huh…… Ah, it’s fine.”

”As expected of Yondaime, you plan your finances really carefully. As expected of a person from Kansai.”

”It’s irrelevant to Kansai. It’s just that the concept of money of you NEETs is too bad.”

The others assume that Yondaime comes from a yakuza family, but it is said that his true identity before this was a successor of a prestigious family of businessmen in Osaka. Though he was long chased out of the family, the blood flowing in his veins is still that of a businessman’s.

After hearing the lucrative salary that Yondaime spoke of, I gave him my okay while feeling shocked. Though the two had long wandered out of the back alley, I still sat blankly on the large steel bucket with my head drooped for quite some time.

”Sorry, sorry. It’s a bit late for me to take your orders— Hmm?”

The kitchen backdoor opened, while the short-haired person wearing the cute expression of a deer and her sailor’s uniform for summer who emerged was Ayaka. Along with the steam that flowed

out of the kitchen, her black apron fluttered as well.

”Aren’t Hiro-san and Yondaime here?”

”Ahh, yes. They said that they still have work to do, so they already left.”

”NEETs have work?” That’s right, they have work though they’re obviously NEETs. “In the end, Fujishima-kun is hanging out here as a NEET reserve even though the summer break hasn’t officially started? Do you want to eat anything?”

”Don’t say that I’m a NEET reserve again! And I don’t have any appetite right now.”

”What’s wrong? Ah, I know. You were given a huge scolding by Alice when you wanted to collect her dirty clothes just now, isn’t that right? I’m telling you that there’s a technique for it. Min-san taught me about it before this. The back of Alice’s neck is especially weak. You can just hug her from behind and blow on it, and use the chance to take off her pajamas and sheets. Eh? Fujishima-kun, are you listening?”

”Yes, yes……” That’s assuming I can do something like that!

”Why is it that you seem listless about life in general? It seems more serious than usual.”

”Your statement of life in general is redundant!”

”Yes, that’s right. I’m sorry! It is the truth after all, so it’s fine even if I don’t say it.” Hey! Isn’t that way of putting it way crueler!

”Well, that’s not it…… Ayaka, how much is your hourly salary at Hanamaru Ramen? Is it about the same as me?”

”Hah? What?”

That moment, a tall female walked out after pushing Ayaka aside. With a ponytail and a fierce expression on her face, she wore a gray tank top that showed her firm arms. It was the owner of Hanamaru Ramen, Min-san.

”850 yen. Is other people’s wages any of your concern?”

”W- Why is it 150 yen more than mine?”

”Ehh? You actually have the nerve to ask for the reason? Don’t you remember how many bowls you broke? As I recall, didn’t you once spill a bowl with ramen in it? Will you only remember if I spill hot soup on your head?”

”No, no, no…… I’m sorry.”

”Ah— So it’s because of Fujishima-kun that the apron is so filthy. The stain already seeped in and can’t be removed anymore.”

In a daze, I stared at the apron on Ayaka, whose cheeks were puffed out. The white logo with ‘Hanamaru Ramen’ printed on it was dyed the color of coffee, almost blending in with the surrounding black cloth. As I recall, I spilled the soup about twice……

Sigh, it’s just 150 yen anyways, so it’s no big deal. Besides, the daily salary that Yondaime is going to pay me can almost hire five Ayakas and still have some money left. It was for that reason that I was assailed by a strange sense of emptiness.

However, that might be quite reasonable— Because Yondaime is actually making a large gamble. He said that the starting event coordination was too sloppy, causing the lead singer of the band to fly into a rage, firing the original event coordinator, sending the case directly to Yondaime on the way. Yondaime even helped out with the payment after taking a fancy to their vigor. So I believe the high salary unmatched with my identity should probably be a kind of investment as well. It’s not like the norm, when one gauges how capable you are and pays you that much, but instead, it means that he’s giving you so much money, and that’s why you have to raise your capability and use it on work— the theory would be something like that.

The said lifestyle of ‘daring to risk’ is one that I cannot comprehend in my whole life. When I think about it, I might not even have the rights to be a NEET.

”By the way, did you wash the sheets and dolls for Alice?”

Min-san knocked on my head, dragging me out from my delusions.

”Ah— Sorry. As she flew in a rage just now, I had no other choice but to retreat temporarily.”

”Do you have any self-consciousness? You have no use at all besides tending to Alice’s troublesome needs!”

So sorry for still having the nerve to be alive.

”There’s no such thing! Fujishima-kun is always useful each time the roast pork brined god knows when appears in the fridge, because his stomach can stand the stench.”

So sorry for actually accepting hourly salary as high as 700 yen…… Though I was already fired. Being utterly shamed, I could only stand up silently and walk towards the emergency backstairs once more.

Before having any expectations or being surprised because of Yondaime’s salary, I think it’s better to finish my own work first, because I am an assistant detective.

When I held the railings, I suddenly thought of a critical question—

…… Is washing clothes part of an assistant’s job?

When I arrived at the platform between the first floor and the second, seemingly dangerous sounds of machines and water came from above, while noises of something being hit could be heard as well, with the sounds of moaning closely following. Is it Alice? I hurriedly ran up the stairs. When I saw two knee-high socks on slender feet poking out of the washing machine in front of room 308 while flailing frantically, I couldn’t help but make an odd cry, and quickly ran over. As my whole being fell into confusion that time, I actually didn’t even think of turning off the power switch, directly pulling out the plug in the end so that the machine would stop. Then, I immediately grabbed Alice’s waist, pulling her out

from the tank.

”Alice! Oi, Alice!”

When I pushed away the water-sodden, long, black hair, the face of Alice, who was seeing stars, appeared.

”Uu- Uuuuuuuuuuu…… The water…… The water……”

”It’s okay now, you can breathe!”

Alice finally stopped struggling after I wiped away the pink detergent on Alice’s cheeks and gently patted her back. She forcefully hugged me, panting repeatedly before my chest.

”……. Th- This is- the largest crisis- in my whole life…… The continually expanding Sahara desert, the emperor penguins that lost their home and the Middle East that is currently under air assault, all of the sorrows in the world that I am unable to save flashed past my mind in an instant.”

”You should think of a way to climb out before thinking of these! I never heard of anyone who drowned in their own washing machine!”

”Please consider my wrists first. In such a posture, how can I have the energy to raise near to half of my weight?”

And you’re actually saying that in a noble manner?

”Speaking of which, what on earth are you doing in the washing machine?”

”Washing my clothes, of course!”

Alice suddenly flung her hair to her back and sat down, starting to rock her body after pushing me aside. The water on her continued to drip on the surrounding pajamas, towels and sheets.

”W- Who would allow a rogue like you…… T- To manage the items that had contact with my skin? I realize that this is a largely immoral mistake! In the future, I will manage it by myself!”

You only realized that now? I always felt troubled about that!

”I really don’t want to see an accident like that happen every time, so it’s better if I handle the clothes. Alice, it won’t do for you.”

”What are you talking about, don’t look down on me. I know how to operate a primitive machine like this as well!”

”You have no idea how to use it at all, even your height isn’t enough!”

Perhaps that was the reason she fell into the washing machine? Though it’s rather unbelievable, I really cannot think of any other reason.

”Plus, you can’t keep adding the fabric softener from the start. You’ll have to add it after adding water.

”Uuuuuu……”

Looking just like a drowned rat, Alice sat on the corridors with her whole face red while she flailed her hands in indignation.

”E- Even so, how can you touch my clothes……”

”No, erm…… I won’t especially sniff if they have a smell or not.”

”Well of course!”

Alice forcefully flung my hands away, trying to pick up the clothes scattered on the floor.

”Just let me handle this. How about you go take a bath and change your clothes?”

”I am planning to do so even if you did not say that. Call Ayaka here for me!”

As the NEET detective who only had her sharp tongue left is not good at it, that would be Ayaka’s job. When I stood up while sighing, Alice ran by the washing machine with her face pale.

”My Lyril!”

The teddy bear of moderate size that she would always hold when she goes out rolled by the washing machine. Alice immediately noticed that the stitches on its head were already loose when she picked it up, while one of the buttons that formed its eyes was missing. Perhaps it was caused when she almost fell into the machine?

”Hurry up and fetch Yondaime, hurry!”

Nearly bursting into tears, Alice hugged her bear while shouting loudly.

*

Disregarding the incident for the moment, my journey of walking the Yamanote Line began from the next day.

Though the band hasn’t released any albums, all of the part time musicians that I came in contact with through the internet answered ‘Yes, I know them’, and caught the bait just like that. What an unbelievably great network age.

We had a meeting with Yondaime until late at night, excluding the people who just want to look at pretty girls, dismissing the methods that are bad for our finances, we decided on the target of our request just like that.

”These people will have a function in July, so we can request to perform with them.”

”But they have a parent company supporting them, so it’s somewhat difficult.”

”You’re thinking of pocketing the profits alone again……”

”Well of course! It’s meaningless if we don’t get all the profits.”

”But merchandises other than the songs might cause the image of the band to drop, so we should be more careful about this. If so,

what do you think about selling the songs on a USB stick?"

"I'll have to calculate for a bit."

I spoke of anything that came to mind. Though they were dismissed by Yondaime one by one, I feel that it's quite interesting for some reason. It might just be my illusion, thinking that I'm doing a meaningful job.

How good would it be if the location of our discussion isn't at the office of Hirasaka-gumi. The room that we used as a conference room was the storeroom/ lounge/ computer room at the bottom layer of the office. Some members gathered at the anteroom outside while watching us chatter. To be honest, that's really quite vexing.

"As expected of Aniki, he keeps talking about things that we don't understand with Sou-san."

"Look, he can talk while typing! Absolutely god-like!"

"Look, he's using goggle search as well!" "We couldn't do it even after three hours!"

Idiotic conversation like that kept coming in from the crack of the door. Can you guys please be silent? And also, it's not goggle, but google.

"Don't you need to give them any work?"

So that the guys behind me won't hear it, I asked Yondaime softly, while he just frowned.

"…… They're probably just handling the decorations, security and trash collection there!" Whoa! He completely treated them as the people doing odd jobs.

"Oi! You guys, stop making noise over there! Hurry up and take a look at the handbook!" Yondaime roared at the door.

"Understood! Very sorry!"

Though the door was closed, the voices could still be heard.

”Listen, you can’t take any action even if detestable guests arrive. Hurry up and practice.”

That was the voice of one of Yondaime’s generals, Rocky.

”Okay, you’ll act as the guest.” “Understood!” Say something in a detestable manner!” “Oi, I want to take a dump, where’s the toilet?” “Do it in your mouth!” “Oi, what do you mean by doing that!”

Yondaime and I exchanged looks, and sighed in turn. Would the event this time be okay?

”I’m going home for a moment. I’ll leave those idiots to you.”

Yondaime stood up and put on his coat. After glancing at the clock on the monitor, I found that the date had already changed.

”You’re leaving me here alone? Those people are still here! Those guys would ask me about kanji that they can’t read every ten minutes, but you’re asking me to face them alone?”

After I cried out in a tone that even I felt embarrassed for, Yondaime answered with his brows furrowed:

”Don’t you have a lot of emails to reply to? And I still have yet to finish the job that Alice asked me to do.”

”Ah, ahhhh……. So it’s that?”

Surprisingly, Yondaime’s interest was in sewing, while his skills would awe even professional-level specialists. The job that was given priority over work was actually the fixing of a small teddy bear.

”The extent of the damage is quite serious, and I couldn’t find a suitable eye for the button as well. Tell Alice that it might be a bit knotty.”

After saying that, the busy yakuza leader walked out of the study. When I returned to the computer while sighing, I heard the small voice of Yondaime’s other general, Pole, coming from the other side of the incompletely closed door.

”Sou-san, the livehouse[2] of Ikebukuro called just now.”

”Is there trouble?”

”They say that someone keeps asking the employees about us. I heard that they wanted to chase him away, but he protested.”

”…… A grunt from Yanagihara-kai? Isn’t there a handbook for dealing with yakuzas? Spread it out.”

”No, well— I heard that they’re kids about the same age as us. And there were about five or six of them.”

Yondaime narrowed his eyes in consideration, and opened the door all of a sudden. While unintentionally standing up to peek, I was so startled by the sudden action that I bumped into the bedstead behind me.

”What are you being so furtive for? This isn’t completely unrelated to you, so listen closely.”

”Ehh, ah, erm…… Sorry.”

That moment, the crowd of black shirted men who were originally fooling around behind the door looked at me solemnly.

”Those guys still dare to look for trouble even when they know that Hirasaka-gumi is in charge, huh?” Yondaime spoke.

”They even spoke of Sou-san, my and a few others’ name, and kept asking on.”

”Completely out of the situation!” “They have guts!” “To heck with him, just let me teach him a lesson!”

While listening to the annoyed voices of his underlings, Yondaime thought while pressing a fist on his forehead.

”Daring to look for trouble even though they know of our names, such a gang shouldn’t exist now.”

The black shirted men then looked like castrated dogs, falling silent

at the same time.

”…… That’s true.” Rocky answered in a low voice. “People like that should have been disposed of by Sou-san long ago.”

”I didn’t do it alone—“

Yondaime hesitated.

”— Disregard this matter for now. In any case, Gardening Club kid, you’ll have to be careful as well. You’re just a newbie, so don’t get involved if there’s anything wrong. Just do your job properly.”

I hesitated for a moment, but still nodded in response. What is this? Why did Yondaime hesitate just now……?

As Yondaime said just now, I told myself to just focus on my own jobs, and walked out of the study after that.

*

After class ended next day, I started to interview various livehouses, clubs and advertising companies. The design of all the advertisements of the whole event was handed to the professionals, but the management of the website fell on my shoulders for some reason. How should I say this, I really can’t face this as though I’m preparing for a school festival anymore. As my salary is so high, I can’t be sloppy when doing things as well.

Yondaime said: *“If let web designers do it, they would usually just fill the website with a huge ton of glamorous Flash effects, causing the servers to shoulder a heavy burden. I hate that, so I’m putting you in charge of that.”* Though it was somewhat of a forced reason, I agree with him more or less.

Just like that, from the Kichijiyou temple from the west to Ueno at the east, the range of my job covered the whole Tokyo. The busy days caused me to feel that I might be able to earn a living from a normal job even if I don’t become a NEET in the future.

The first time that I met Renji-san would be on a Friday in the

middle of that overwhelmingly busy July.

I arrived at Harajuku on the evening that day. During the continuous concerts held on the end of August, the event that gathered the most attention was the Harajuku concert. Thus, more work had to be done on the layout there and the like. The venue was located at a space between a livehouse and a concert hall at a building in Meiji Road. I was actually planning to just have a look and take some photos.

After entering the entrance that used silver and blue as a keynote, the lively sounds of a loud guitar riff directly pierced through the skin on my whole body. The lit stage was like an aquarium at night, while repeatedly waving outlines of hands and hair of the audience could be seen as the arrogant-looking band members wearing clothes of Harajuku fashion were singing on the stage loudly.

I approached the bar surrounded in pillars of white light and shouted out my order of tomato juice. When I took out my digital camera, a young female worker looked at me in displeasure.

”It is forbidden for photos be taken here!”

”I have permission!”

”What—? What did you say?”

”I’m Fujishima who called yesterday! Can you call the chief over here?”

”I’m telling you that taking photos here isn’t permitted! We forbid that!”

”But I have special permission!”

Because of the loud performance, we couldn’t hear each other clearly. As the two of us were trying in vain to converse, I clearly heard that voice through the din in the dark livehouse.

”I’m tellin’ ya that my memory ain’t that good, so sorry for that. How are ya related to me again?”

I immediately turned around.

Part of his hair was highlighted like a streak of lightning, and complemented with his tall figure, he could be clearly seen even in the darkness of the livehouse. With his goggles shaped shades and confident smile, he was a sharp looking man. He would be about twenty, I suppose?

”Hmm, did I owe ya money or somethin’? Or did I miss an appointment with ya?”

”Stop faking!” “We remember it quite well!” “You broke someone’s nose, and it hasn’t recovered till now!”

Sounds of abuse rang. The ones who surrounded the man in shades were a bunch of vicious looking people whose hair were bleached too much and their faces were full of piercings.

”I’m tellin’ ya that the last time I came here was five years ago! Ya don’t remember who the prime minister five years ago was, do ya? Anyways, being able to meet here is some kinda fate as well, so why don’t we mend our ties? I’ll treat ya.”

He spoke in a Kansai slang that was rather memorable for some reason. After that, the man in shades approached after weaving through the crowd. I hastily made space for him.

”Gimme four cups of whiskey with water.”

The waitress at the counter served him just that with a look of annoyance.

”Oi, stop that pretense!” “What are you running for!” “Get out!”

The troublesome trio still persisted, chasing him through the crowd.

”Well well, why don’t we just be friends after havin’ a cuppa beer?”

Is there something wrong with his brains? Is this really the time to say a thing like this? So that I wouldn’t get involved, I decided to look for the person in charge by myself, and thus left the conversation of the person with Kansai slang at the bar that was

almost swallowed by darkness.

At that moment, the word ‘Hirasaka’ came into my ears. I indeed heard that. I turned around and saw that the person in shades and the thugs in piercings were still in an argument at the other side of the crowd. Which?

Which of them said it? Does Hirasaka refer to Hirasaka-gumi?

As I knew Hirasaka-gumi for quite some time now, I recognize all of the faces of the members. Thus, I could quickly confirm that all of the four are not members of the gang. However, since Yondaime's network of contacts is so wide and Harajuku is his territory as well, they might be people related to the gang.

Uh oh. What if they really are related? If people related to Hirasaka-gumi make trouble at the venue of the concert, all of Yondaime's efforts would go to waste.

This time, I clearly heard the word 'Hirasaka' from one of the men in piercings, but the latter part of their conversation was doused by the performance. I made an effort to push the crowd away, hoping to get closer to the counter.

"You bastard!" "Stop talking glib—"

Just when the man speaking in Kansai slang held a cup of beer in both hands, two of the men in piercings tried to grab him that instant. The sound like the bursting of a paper balloon was made simultaneously by the two men, and they crouched down in agony while holding their right hands with their left. Screams echoed all around, while the side of the guy with Kansai slang was naturally vacated. I really couldn't believe what my eyes saw— using a high side-spin with overwhelming precision, the man kicked the palms of the two men who rushed over, while the more terrifying thing was that not even half a drop of beer in his hands spilled out.

"Whoops. My leg moved by itself. Are ya okay? Forgive me!"

The man with Kansai slang placed the glasses back onto the bar, and was planning to squat down by the two men.

"T- That hurts!" "Are my fingers broken……" "Y- You bastard!"

The remaining thug pushed away his companions, planning to hit the shoulders of the man with Kansai slang. That moment, I saw it. The Kansai slang guy rose while pulling his sunglasses down to this neck position.

It was a gaze as cold as steel that underwent numerous hardships.

Uh oh, that was my immediate instinct.

I didn't really think of a plan, but my legs moved by themselves. When a person's thoughts fall into confusion at the moment he is cornered, he might make the most suitable judgment instead, while that was what happened to me. I poured the tomato juice I was holding onto the Kansai slang guy's chest from a side.

"—Nooaaaaaaaaaa?" The Kansai slang guy made an odd screech, while the man in piercings jumped backwards in fright. At that instant, I rushed to the middle of the two.

"Ahhh, s- s- s- s- sorry, are you okay?"

I noticed that the speed of my speech became quite rapid as well.

"Are you wet? You're probably drenched huh my apologies I'll compensate you for this so please follow me outside, outside!"

"Wai…… Uwaa! Stop pushin' me!"

Like a sumo wrestler, I frantically pushed the Kansai slang guy to the entrance. "Bastard! Wait a sec!" The wall of humans that reformed blocked the angry roars of the man in piercings. When we pushed on the thick, soundproof door, even the Kansai slang guy started to run while laughing as well.

When we escaped to Matsumoto Pharmacy at Takeshita, we finally slowed our footsteps after running into a small alley.

"Narumi? So yer called Narumi? Does that count as a surname? Ah, so it's yer name. I'm Renji, as in striking gold in the east next time[3]. So that's why I returned to Tokyo."

I really don't get his way of explaining, but I still couldn't bear to say that to Renji-san, who was laughing alone.

"But speaking of which, I was saved all thanks to ya, Narumi."

"Well…… I didn't really save you, Renji-san. It's more like I saved

them.”

Renji-san suddenly froze, pushing his sunglasses onto his forehead after that. While wiping the sweat on my arms on my jeans, I asked:

”You probably planned to hammer him on his head, didn’t you?”

”How did ya know?”

”Usually, people would shift goggles-shaped onto their forehead if they wish to move it away, would they not? They won’t particularly pull it to the position of the neck.”

Besides, I heard them saying something like breaking others’ noses. I will be very troubled if someone is hurt there.

”Oh—! Oh— Ohhhh!”

Renji-san kept stroking my head. Please don’t do that, it’s embarrassing.

”It seems like I’m somewhat detestable.”

Actually, the true reason that I wished to stop the battle wasn’t because of such detailed thoughts, but because of the murderous intent from Renji-san’s gaze. Though seeing him laughing happily away now made me think it was all just my imagination……

”Actually, it’s really easy for me to lose control.” Renji-san explained. “So I originally wanted ta live more tastefully. I’ve decided in my heart that I ain’t gonna lose control again no matter what, but my subconscious caused my legs and my head to lose control. How pathetic!” Renji-san started to laugh. What a dangerous person.

After that, I explained to him that I would compensate him for ruining his T-shirt— “Really! Then let’s go right now! It’s been a while since I went shoppin’.” In the end, he actually agreed happily. No, erm……. Though I don’t have a right to say so from the perspective of a perpetrator, shouldn’t people usually refuse politely?

I never thought that he would tell me to buy him three new shirts after visiting five or six boutiques to try on a bunch of clothes.

”Thanks! Shoppin’ without caring for the price really feels refreshin’!”

Renji-san walked out of the shop wearing a brand new orange shirt and said to me with a smile while patting my back. I did frantically say that the more expensive clothes are ‘completely unsuitable!’, advising him not to buy them, but my wallet still couldn’t be saved.

”The third-most happiest thing in the world is buyin’ stuff with other people’s money.”

I think I heard of a sentence like that before this, so I sighed and ignored it.

”The second would be eatin’ with other people’s money.”

”I didn’t ask you about that.”

”And then, the first would be going to Disneyland with other people’s money.”

”Why? How did you form such a conclusion?”

”I returned to Tokyo so painstakingly, I really should go out and have fun.”

”It’s already seven, where do you think Disneyland is at?”

”Isn’t it at California, USA?”

”Then what for did you mention returning to Tokyo so painstakingly!”

”Very good, our partnership for doing tsukkomis is improvin’.”

”Before doing research on tsukkomi partnerships, shouldn’t you pay more attention to the topic first!”

Completely ignoring my anger, Renji-san said something like ‘Let’s

go have a drink. My treat.' Instead. As the weather was extremely hot, while I was rather thirsty as well, I decided to accept his offer. I should say— Think of a way to get back the money for buying his clothes. And I have to inquire about his relationship with Hirasaka-gumi as well.

After wandering Harajuku for quite some time, we finally found a seat for two at the crowded Dotoru Coffee after quite some effort.

"Do you need me to send the dirty shirt for cleaning?"

The shirt that I dirtied using tomato juice was in a bag below the table. As the white clothing was dyed red, it seemed like it would be hard for the stains to be removed by normal washing.

"It's fine, ya don't need to be so worried."

"I really wish that you showed me that kindness an hour ago."

"Ya won't buy clothes for me if I do so!"

That's true! I knew it!

"I'll treat ya in this shop instead. Order any drinks or food you like."

Telling me this in Dotoru is a bit…… Even so, this person doesn't seem to be a cheapskate. Perhaps he just doesn't know how to manage money properly?

"It seemed like you planned to treat the three looking for trouble beer as well, didn't you? What were you thinking?"

"Wasn't it an opportunity of a lifetime? I was thinkin' of treasurin' the opportunity of us meetin'."

"Didn't it seem like they're looking for trouble no matter how you look at it? Please don't treasure a meeting like this!"

That moment, the gaze hidden under Renji-san's sunglasses suddenly softened.

”Each encounter is important— someone once said that to me.”

It was like he suddenly deflated. Looking at my own slanted reflection on Renji-san’s shades, I gently held my cup of iced coffee.

”Well, I always lose things quickly……”

Renji-san explained in an expression that was hard for me to differentiate if he was laughing or in convulsions.

”Though most of it was my fault— havin’ super bad memory and ain’t good at managing money. There ain’t even one friend left in Tokyo, so that’s why I’m reflecting on this right now. It can’t be helped that the friendship that I once had was destroyed, if not, I’m still wishin’ that we can still be friends when we meet.”

How can he speak of such a gentle thought using a tone like incense that had already burnt to ashes?

”…… There’s nothing that ‘can’t be helped’.”

The words unintentionally slipped out of my mouth.

”Hmm?”

It felt like Renji-san was staring directly at me, causing me to avert my gaze to the surface of the cold coffee instead. Why did I say something like that? I don’t understand as well.

”As long as we are still alive…… There is nothing that can be completely destroyed.”

”…… There probably is, for a few times now, I already……”

”No.”

As long as we are still alive, even when something appears to be different, it is still……

”What a strange fellow. Why are you being so resolute in front of someone you just met?”

That's right. Even I felt so as well, making me feel embarrassed, frantically stirring my iced coffee with the straw. Speaking of which, for what reason did we enter Dotoru Coffee again? That's right, isn't it to find out the relationship between this person and Hirasaka-gumi? That's why—

And then, Renji-san's voice overlapped with my thoughts.

"If so, why don't you let me try bein' yer friend, Narumi?"

I raised my head, while Renji-san showed me a mischievous smile.

"I'm somewhat of a rascal, so the friendship would probably last only for a month or so."

Just at that moment, I saw a trace of loneliness in the eyes covered by the goggles-type shades, and could only respond with a weak smile.

"To tell ya the truth, though I'm sayin' something like it's the opportunity of a lifetime, I'm actually a worthless wretch. I can do it no matter how ruthless things are! If ya still insist that the friendship won't be destroyed, then let's try to be friends."

"No, erm……"

To search for a suitable answer, I crossed my arms and switched them for quite a few times.

"We shouldn't 'try' to be friends, should we?"

"That's true……" Renji-san smiled wryly. "My bad. Just forget about it!"

"Erm…… I don't mean that. I meant we shouldn't just try, wouldn't it be fine if we just become friends?"

Isn't it fine if we just exchange phone numbers normally here? Isn't it fine if we just be friends? As I was about to express my thoughts, Renji-san's gaze shifted upwards, and stared at the entrance across me. After that, he frowned, showing a visibly displeased expression.

When I turned over, the automatic doors made of glass already opened, while a few dark-skinned young men appeared continually. The two men in front pointed in our direction, and gave commands to the people behind them. They were the men in piercings that we met before this, and they probably found people to help out, causing their numbers to increase. At the instant when I found that something was off, a silhouette already passed my side. It was Renji-san.

I didn't have enough time to stop him this time. Renji-san just said faintly: "What a drag.", while the man in piercings already grabbed Renji-san's shirt from his chest as I was about to stand up clumsily. What occurred next was blocked by Renji-san's wide back.

A dull thud rang in the shop, while the man in piercings leaned weakly on Renji-san and promptly collapsed onto the ground right after that. Screams echoed in the shop.

"Bastard, what are you trying to d……!"

This time, I could clearly see Renji-san punching his opponent's face. One of the thugs rushed forwards while roaring in anger, but he was beaten up by Renji-san, blood spurting out of his nose. The more astonishing thing was that Renji-san actually had the time to readjust a crooked table beside him.

I, who was paralyzed with fear, felt a familiar sense of terror instead.

The fighting style that is strong until this extent…… Did I see it before somewhere?

When the thugs moaning on the floor were about to stand up, Renji-san focused his attention outside. A few blue silhouettes could be seen outside the glass door. The police.

"Uh oh!"

Stepping over the collapsed thugs, Renji-san rushed to the crowd looking here from afar, running to an exit leading to a side alley. The sounds of his footsteps were blocked by the closing door, while

a huge commotion started in the shop that moment. When I saw the policemen in uniforms walking in, I unhesitatingly decided to flee as well. When I was walking to the entrance, my feet stumbled over something.

When I had a closer look, I realized that it was the plastic bag below the table.

After escaping from Dotoru, I headed directly for livehouse, and suddenly felt that I really have guts, as my appearance might have been remembered by the thugs in piercings there after all. But since I originally went there for work, I have yet to take any photos, so I have no choice but to go there once more.

The audience there seemed to have changed, while another band was already performing on the stage. I hid alone at a crowded corner full of heat with my back against the wall, letting myself drift in along the flow of surging music, weakly pressing the shutter of the digital camera for a few times.

My gaze fell onto the ground— onto the bag containing Renji-san's clothes. What should I do with this? I haven't asked for a way to contact him, so I can't return them to him at all. Even so……

After taking out the shirt and spread it out, I noticed that only the collar and sleeves were black. There were Japanese styled patterns printed on the shoulder, back and side abdomen. Black and purple were radially scattered in an unorganized way, forming a wondrous pattern. Hmm? It doesn't seem like fireworks, while I seem to have the impression that I once saw the picture before. After I pondered while drawing on the pattern with my finger, I realized that it was not printed, but sewed. It's really surprising. I am not sure of how many threads it tooe to sew a picture as complicated as this, but probably it should be quite expensive.

So that I can return it to him when we meet again, I should send it for cleaning…… Suddenly realizing that I was actually thinking of such a thing surprised me slightly. I am still thinking of meeting a person like that? Really? I don't know.

He's really a strange person. But since the people that are not strange among my friends is an extreme minority, it's really quite sad. However, the way of Renji-san's strangeness is largely different. Mnn, a strangeness both far off and dangerous. It felt much like a strong acid and a strong alkali being filled in the same glass bottle at the same time, separated only by a piece of thin paper. Though the time that I hung out with him was short, I still felt quite uneasy.

In any case, he is indeed a resident in the world of violence, a person that one would do better not to approach.

Even so, when I raised my head to look at the stage so that I would focus my attention on the performance, I suddenly realized that my ears could not accommodate any music as the exaggerated Kansai slang, sunglasses that concealed the beast-like gaze, and the cordial, seemingly smile kept swirling in my mind.

In the end, I still didn't manage to ask if he had any relationship with Hirasaka-gumi. But if he is truly related, I feel that no matter if I wish for it or not, we will meet again one day.

On that moment, would I be able to continue my words not yet spoken?

Though it was something that I found out after a long time, it seemed like our encounter was not just a coincidence. Thus, I really met Renji-san again after that— and it was in a way more bizarre that I had imagined.

*

The summer break officially started from the next day, but my daily life did not seem to have any significant changes, while the only thing different was the fact that the time for me to arrive at Hanamaru Ramen was advanced to about noon.

Though it was summer, there were so many customers that they had to wait outside. It's true that the taste of the soup improved quite a lot, causing quite a stir, but the main reason would be

because of the ice cream.

”I’ll have a citrus sherbet.” “Chocolate peppermint ice cream.” “Vanilla flavor for me.”

”This is a ramen shop!” Min-san roared at her usual customers while standing behind the counter. “Order ramen and I’ll throw in some ice cream as dessert.”

”We’re starting to sell cold Chinese noodles as well!”

Sweating profusely, Ayaka served the dishes and washed the cutlery in turn, a satisfied smile on her face. The ossans started to laugh as well, and started to order ramen. The two cooperates quite well, being a far cry from a certain useless NEET reserve. *Stop calling me a NEET reserve!* While doing a tsukkomi on myself, I opened the kitchen backdoor, stepping into the steamy kitchen right after.

”Have you finished washing the clothes?”

At the corridor at the end of the kitchen, a wall of dolls was piled up at a position invisible to the customers, while Alice asked in a slightly thorny tone behind the wall.

”Ahh, mnn. It’ll be done after about thirty minutes.”

”You did not peek or touch the articles in the laundry net, did you?”

”I’m telling you that I won’t do that!”

Ever since Alice fell into the washing machine, she started to mind things like this a lot. As her height does not allow her to operate the washing machine, she would now stuff the clothes she wants to wash into a laundry net, throwing them into the washing machine after that, so that’s quite an improvement. On the other hand, I would take the opportunity to change the sheets and clean the room, but she used *’I will definitely not allow you to wash my good friends!’* as an excuse, taking refuge at the ramen shop with her army of dolls.

”But what will you do when you want to dry the clothes?” I

suddenly thought of that question.

”I’ll dry them myself. You will come in contact with my clothes if I put you in charge, is that not right?”

Ah, that’s true. But even if she tosses them into a dryer, they probably won’t dry if they’re in a net.

”Then I’m going out earlier today. I’m going somewhere quite far today.”

”So you are trying to slip away early today as well?”

Hugging a bunny doll, Alice approached while kneeling, slight suspicion in her gaze.

”Mnn…… Is there anything wrong?” Alice hugged her doll tightly, hopping around while squatting. What a nimble person. “You are my assistant, are you not? Do you not have other more important tasks? Pulling the ring of the Dr. Peppers for me and the like, for instance.”

”That’s a headache. Or should I just open all of the cans in the fridge directly? Nono, I’m just joking.”

With her whole face red, Alice randomly picked up a bottle of beer to throw at me, but fell backwards because of its weight. I hastily shifted my focus.

”Erm…… Ayaka, can you show up at Alice’s when you’re free?”

”Asking Ayaka for help so that you can loaf off, has your mind short-circuited! Even phytoplasma are more decisive than you!”

Alice pounded on the wooden floorboards of the corridor. Shouldn’t phytoplasma be the name of parasitic bacteria? Aren’t I often compared with various things.

”E- Erm…… Must it be me?”

”M- Must it be you!? Wh…… Who was the one who said so!”

She was actually so agitated that the wall of dolls collapsed. So that the dolls would not roll into the kitchen, I slipped away by Alice while picking them up. What's up with her……

"Fine, I understand! Go wherever you want! By the time you come back, I would have learnt how to pull the plug in the bathtub, tie up a plastic bag and fold my pajamas by myself! You will never have any work to do in your life! I advise you to hurry up and listen to a talk about how to claim unemployment insurance at the Bureau of Labor!"

You don't know how to do even this? And when did I join the Bureau of Labor? Though I thought of a lot to rebuke, since Ayaka was signaling to me with her gaze, I could only stay silent and walk back to the kitchen backdoor.

"I can help after the prime time after noon. However…… It seems like it really must be you, Fujishima-kun."

Why? Isn't it the same no matter who fetches her Dr. Pepper?

As I was about to walk out of the kitchen, I was called by Min-san again.

"Where are you going to fool around today? Ueno? Ahh, that's nice. I want to you to go somewhere for me along the way."

"At Ueno?"

"No, Kitasenjuu."

How is that along the way? The distance from Kitasenjuu to Ueno is not 'along the way' at all!

"Do you have anything to say? It's all because of you making the apron filthy and tattered, so it won't do at all if we don't get a new one. The newly made one seems to be already done, so help me fetch it back."

As I was thinking of retorting her for asking me to go to Kitasenjuu just for an apron, Min-san forcefully stuffed a note into my hands. An address, a phone number and the name of 'Wakagi Crafts Store'

were written on it.

”It’s my friend’s shop, and I specially ordered it. Though he said that he was going to mail it to me, I want to get it today, so go fetch it for me.”

I was pushed out of the kitchen backdoor, and the door before me was immediately locked.

Wakagi Crafts Store is located at a dingy two-storey building by the Marui Supermarket in front of Kitasenjuu station. When I heard the words ‘Crafts Store’, I thought that it would be the extension of a fashion accessory store, but when I saw the huge wooden cabinets tall as the ceiling as soon as I stepped into the shop, filled with a large assortment of clothing material of linen and hemp at the two sides of the shop entrance, I felt that the shop was more like a wholesaler.

A crowd of girls were gathered at the corner where ribbons and embroidery threads, which was more or less as I expected. There were quite a lot of people there. It was like people like me shouldn’t appear at a place like this, so I tried to walk into the shop while following the edge of the wooden cabinets so that the customers wouldn’t notice me.

At the other side of the counter, there stood the young shopkeeper(probably) wearing an apron with the logo of the shop sewn on it, a graceful looking man with short hair and glasses that looked suitable for him. Ah, I see. His appearance seems like it would be popular with females. No wonder a crowd of what seemed to be high school girls kept glancing at the counter from time by time. *Though the reason for the booming business probably isn’t just that*— I approached the counter while thinking of that, I suddenly noticed a man talking to the shopkeeper over the counter, causing me to freeze immediately.

”…… told you before, a Chinese pattern is too fine, it’s impossible to make an embroidered patch like this.”

”What about using a laser type? Our shop has it as well.”

”How about a Chidori stitch? I don’t wish to run a few more rounds when it’s nearly don—“

The man who was speaking raised his head halfway through his conversation. As I met the beast-like gaze, I had long forgotten that I was at a crafts store, and only felt that I was about to be killed.”

”Y…… Yondaime?”

”…… You……. Why are you here?”

Even though he’s a young yakuza leader who underwent hundreds of battles, his face was slightly green because of the suddenness of the matter, and could only manage to say those words. On the other hand, the shopkeeper curiously looked at Yondaime and I in turn.

”Erm, well…… Err, eh? Well, Min-san told me to come.”

Of course, Yondaime was the one who came back to his senses first. After that, he approached while wearing a ferocious gaze,

completely ignoring the voice of the shopkeeper calling him ‘Hina?’, dragging me out of the door behind the counter after grabbing my collar.

”Wai- Yondaime, w- wait a minute, it’s painful.”

When I was dragged to the dark, hot stairwell, I was finally released after being flung to the wall.

”What are you doing here! How did you know of this shop?”

”N- Nothing much. I’m telling you that Min-san asked me to come here.”

”Ahhh…… So it’s Master. Blast……”

Yondaime showed a bitter expression as though he swallowed a cigarette whole.

Though on the surface, this person has the coldness of a sniper wolf who prowls the concrete jungles (Even I, myself, laughed when I wrote this), he actually has a cute side for liking to sew in private. Not only does he have to frantically hide this from his underlings, he was always treated as a laughing stock by Alice and the others.

”Listen closely, do not speak of this shop to anyone.”

Yondaime caught hold of my collar, while the words that he spoke were like a sharp knife pressing on my abdomen.

”…… Who else knows?”

”Only Min-san.”

This is quite a headache. For some reason, everyone seems to think that I am a tight-lipped person, but actually it’s just that I won’t deliberately speak of matters concerning other people, but my thoughts are often exposed as I talked to myself when listening to other people’s conversations.

”I’ll kill you if you dare to speak of this.”

”I- I get it……”

”Hurry up and scram when you finish your job!”

”Hina, what are you doing? Remember not to cause trouble for the customers.”

We heard a call. Yondaime released me and turned around. The door was slightly opened, while the shopkeeper poked his head out from the gap.

”And this child is……? Did I hear you say something about Min-san or something?”

The shopkeeper smiled while saying to me.

”Anyways, come into the shop first, it’s so hot here!”

Though it was already surprising to me when the shopkeeper called Yondaime ‘Hina’, the more surprising thing was that Yondaime actually called him ‘Yoshiki-san’. It’s the first time I heard this person use an honorific.

”I really can’t find a button suitable for Alice’s doll, and the stitches are all scruffy now, so I have to give it a complete overhaul. That’s why I came here for Yoshiki-san’s help.”

We sat together at the space behind the counter with our knees touching, and couldn’t be seen from the shop. An unfinished embroidered patch on an embroidery hoop and a pin cushion stuffed full of colorful thread and needles was displayed on the workbench.

”Though it’s so far away here, Hina still frequents this place.” Yoshiki-san said while smiling. As he has to manage the business in his shop, he sits at a position where he can see the whole shop from.

”A lot of fabrics and threads can only be found here, after all.”

In slight displeasure, Yondaime stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

”That isn’t really true. You can probably find them at the center of the cities, at shops like Yuzawaya and so on.”

”There’s no difference, buying it anywhere is the same.”

I thought while gazing at the two: What kind of relationship do thesz two have? The texture of Yoshiki-san’s skin is extremely good, so his age couldn’t be judged at all. From the impression that the end of his eyes give, perhaps he’s in the later part of his twenties? Though he’s charming, it doesn’t really seem faked. If I say that Hiro-san’s appearance is like champagne, Yoshiki-san’s would probably be natural mineral water. Even so, he could still make other people’s heart pound when he smiles.

”Erm, Fujishima……kun? Is that it?”

”Eh? Ah, yes. Just call me Narumi, everyone calls me that.”

”Why does Hina call you the Gardening Club kid? What kind of relationship do you have with him?”

”Ah— That’s a long story.”

”You’re probably not from the gang, are you? You look like you’re still in high school to me.”

I nodded furiously. Yoshiki-san gave me a hearty smile.

”Hina doesn’t have many friends from before, only those who do mischief with him and his silly underlings. That’s why a friend like Narumi-kun is hard to come by.”

”Yoshiki-san, please stop that. I don’t have that kind of relationship with the Gardening Club kid.”

Yondaime denied rather earnestly.

”Not that kind of relationship? Which are you referring to?”

”This guy is Alice’s assistant. You know, Alice, the kid that specializes at collecting information. Because of some troubles before this, we underwent the sake ritual just like that.”

”Sake ritual? Eh? Didn’t you say that he’s not from the gang just now?” Yoshiki-san looked somewhat confused.

”…… Sworn brothers.”

”Doesn’t that mean you’re friends?”

”I’m telling you that’s not it, we’re sworn brothers!”

”Then your relationship is closer than friends.”

Seeing Yondaime standing up while roaring like a beast, Yoshiki-san couldn’t help but laugh out loud. When Yondaime was about to talk back, the calls of a high school girl came from the other side of the counter, causing Yoshiki-san to turn around immediately. That moment, Yondaime glared at me with a gaze that was like a freshly sharpened knife.

”Don’t you talk so much.”

”But the ones who were talking the most were you and Yoshiki-san……”

Yoshiki-san turned around soon after that. Helping his customers and chatting with us while sitting there, he was just like the guardian of a sentou.

”The girls were all looking at Hina! I told them that you’re like my younger brother.”

”You’re spouting nonsense again!”

”But there isn’t much difference, is it?” Yoshiki-san pushed Yondaime’s shoulders and laughed again. The gaze of the wolf sharpened.

”W- Well, doesn’t that mean Yoshiki-san is like my brother as well?”

The words that I randomly said to ease the atmosphere were actually a huge miscalculation. Not only Yondaime, even Yoshiki-san was in a daze.

”S- S- S- S- Sorry! I got carried away!”

I hurriedly retracted my feet, but they were forcefully stamped on by Yondaime.

”Ahh, no, I don’t mean that. Hina, you should stop using violence. Seriously, you were a person who uses your fists along with your mouth from before this……”

”I’m living in a world where punches and kicks are necessary.”

”Narumi-kun, though he’s so arrogant now, there was a time when he was quite childish as well. Though he likes dolls a lot, his skills of operating crane machines were terrible, and he even cried while borrowing money from me.”

”I did not cry! Stop that!”

”And also, his tolerance of alcohol was terrible before this—“

Yoshiki-san spoke of shocking facts about Hina-chan one after another, while I could only smile while being flustered, and could only sit straight with my knees closed, looking at the faces of the two in turn. What kind of relationship do these two have? Is Yoshiki-san a senpai who once joined Hirasaka-gumi? But as I recall, isn’t Yondaime the first leader of the gang?

”Hina, can I tell him about our true relationship?”

”Stop messing around!”

”Isn’t it fine……” Though Yoshiki-san smiled wryly, he still unintentionally blurted it out. “Let me tell you, Hina’s past girlfriend was quite fond of sewing, and was a regular customer of our shop as well.”

So Yondaime had a girlfriend? Eh? Ah? O- Of course, having a girlfriend isn’t strange, but I really can’t imagine it. Completely

ignoring the displeased expression of *'Just stop already!'* on Yondaime's face, Yoshiki-san continued in full flight.

"Because of his girlfriend's requests, Hina frequently came to the shop. After that, Hina started to get interested in it after getting taught by his girlfriend. Now, he's a regular customer as well."

After a huge sigh, Yondaime crossed his arms.

"Gardening Club kid, I will beat you up until you lose your memory after this."

Being told such a frightfully horrendous news made me seriously consider if I should immediately abandon the job that I was given and run away. If so, I will definitely get beaten up by Min-san as well. Not only my memory, I might lose even my life.

"Ah, Min-san's request? An apron, is it? It's done. Yes, yes, you came here for this. HIna, can you get it for me at the back?"

While muttering to himself, Yondaime took out an apron filled in a plastic bag from the back of the shop.

"I modified the logo of the shop slightly. By the way, please tell Min-san that I can charge her less if she wants me to redo the portiere as well."

"…… Ah, so you were the one who designed that, Yoshiki-san?"

"That's right."

Though it's a seemingly ordinary shop, their products are quite tasteful. I really admire the sharp design on the black apron.

"Hurry up and scram since you already got what you want. Shouldn't your main focus be in Ueno!" With a ferocious gaze, Yondaime forced me to stand after kicking my shin.

Yondaime's dark green Maserati was parked in the parking lot by the building. If people not in the know saw the teddy bear doll wrapped in thick material, they would probably laugh for a whole week.

”You probably aren’t sending me to Ueno…… Are you? Fine, fine, I get it.”

”I don’t have time to go to Ueno!”

As I was about to walk towards the station, the phone in Yondaime’s pocket rang. After picking up the phone, Yondaime’s face clouded over, while I couldn’t leave as though I didn’t see anything as well. What happened?

”Gardening Club kid, change of plans. Get on the car!”

Yondaime stuffed his phone into his pocket, a look of displeasure on his face, and immediately sat on the driver’s seat.

”Huh? Ehh?”

”Just get on the car! Cancel the plans for the livehouse for now, I’ll apologize to them after this.”

”W- What happened?”

I got on the car, inquiring to Yondaime while buckling the unfamiliar seatbelts of the imported car.

”Someone in the gang caused trouble at Akasaka., at the place where the concert is going to be held next month.”

I got in contact with the Alice and the gang and gave them orders in place of Yondaime.

”Mnn, that’s right, Pole will get you the video later, so you can just analyze it for a bit? EH? Lyril? That teddy bear? Ah…… Mnn…… Well……”

”Tell her that I got the materials and will fix it tomorrow! We don’t have the time to worry about a friggin’ doll right now!” Yondaime roared on the driver’s seat.

’Actually calling my precious Lyril a ‘friggin’ doll’! Is there any

difference between the concern for your gang and me being concerned for my good friend!'

I seem to feel like Alice is being furious at the other side of the phone.

"Even if you say that to me, I'm troubled as well……"

The two made a commotion with me between them and hung up after that. That time, the car was just about to go on the Shuuto Expressway. The inertia from the acceleration caused me be pressed on the seat as the other cars with 100 km/h gradually shot backwards in my view.

I glanced at the driver's seat. Originally, Yondaime's expressionless face was like a foggy glass, but it already turned into the fierce gaze of a wolf. Should I speak? I hesitated for quite some time.

The large livehouse at Akasaka was originally one of the main venues in our whole plan. It is said that tens of men in black shirts claiming to be from Hirasaka-gumi came barging in, forcing the shop owners to let them see the workers' lounge, and they actually used violence when the workers refused their entry using the lack of an appointment as the reason. The thugs ran away from the scene immediately after that. I don't know whether to say that it's lucky or unlucky, but the workers haven't called the police yet. That would probably be thanks to Hirasaka-gumi's bad name. As they were scared of actions being taken in revenge, they called the leader of the gang before calling the police.

The thought of *'How is this possible?'* surfaced in my mind. No matter how dumb the members of Hirasaka-gumi are, it's not until the extent that they would do something so stupid as shaming their leader at such a critical time— I should say that it's completely impossible, because those people probably don't even know where the venue is.

"…… Rocky said he already called all of the members to the office."

I told him anxiously.

”That part doesn’t matter.” Yondaime answered in a rigid voice. “We’re going directly to Alice’s right now.”

To Alice’s? I stared at Yondaime’s face once more.

The video of the thugs from the surveillance cameras at the scene were taken by Hiro-san using his contacts. The video is currently under analysis by Alice. Who would do such a thing?

That moment, I finally realized something. So Yondaime didn’t feel that it was done by his underlings. If he suspected one of his own, he wouldn’t need to collect the video through Hiro-san, and could just question them all one by one.

Because he did not suspect his people— He is going to give the detective a request.

When I came to my senses, the Maserati already left the Shuto Expressway. Using shortcuts that were not in traffic jams, we entered the small streets with familiar scenery. The brilliant sun of summer was just setting, while short shadows extended from the squat buildings at the two sides of the road. There were girls wearing clothes that showed their shoulders and thighs wandering the boutiques, coffee shops and galleries on the street. Yondaime drove his Maserati slightly roughly, while the surrounding people looked at us with strange gazes, as though they saw a car carrying a ticking bomb pass by.

After that, Yondaime parked his car into the parking lot before the alley. Walking down the car, it was like the hot smell of asphalt mixed together with the sweat on our arms, sticking close to our skin. The two of us ran towards Hanamura Ramen opposite to us.

We ran upstairs after greeting Min-san shortly, and pulled the door of the NEET Detective Agency open. When I stepped into the extremely cold room, I even felt dazed because of the difference in temperature.

”Did you really find a replacement for Lyril’s eye? If his profound, endearing radiance cannot be recovered, I will not accept it, so you’d better let me have a look before putting it on.”

Sitting on her bed, Alice turned around and inquired. While her eyes were gazing at Yondaime, her fingers pounding on the keyboard did not have any sign of stopping. Yondaime sighed and took out a button in a small plastic bag, while the detective nodded in satisfaction and turned around to stare at the monitors after glancing at it.

”Have you finished your analysis?”

Yondaime quickly walked into the bedroom, kneeled directly at the edge of the bed, and looked at one of the monitors as well. The video played was probably taken from a surveillance camera, as a coarse monochrome video was shown by the screen— the silhouettes of men in black T-shirts. One of them was facing the camera, and the white logo could be clearly seen on his chest. A swallowtail butterfly was printed on the center of the arc, meaning that it’s Hirasaka-gumi’s emblem. As the video was soundless, though I could see the men in black shirts attacking the workers and pedestrians, knocking them on the ground, I did not feel any realism in the scene.

A black T-shirt worn by the members of Hirasaka-gumi was spread on the sheets.

It is indeed the same thing. Which means:

”Though the quality of the video isn’t that good, we can still overlay and compare them after analysis.”

Alice spoke in a faint tone, while Yondaime nodded in answer. Even I noticed two things— After glancing at my sworn brother, the both of us confirmed the truth with our silence.

The emblem is the real one. It is indeed the uniform of Hirasaka-gumi. And also—

The ones wearing the clothes aren’t among the gang at all, all of them were unfamiliar faces.

That moment, a phone rang, while Yondaime took out the phone in his pocket.

”…… Mnn, we saw the video. No need, you don’t need to gather them, it’s not a problem of our gang…… I know……. So they disappeared? What about the keys? …… Oh, mnn, okay. I’ll ask Major to investigate. Alice is taking action now, so we’re definitely digging those guys out.”

Yondaime ended the call. From the movements of him keeping his phone, I finally sensed the wavering and signs of anger in his heart. Up till now, Yondaime might have more or less a little doubt on his underlings. To suppress that emotion, he kept his face emotionless. But now— the burden is gone.

”Was it…… Rocky? I heard a bit.”

Yondaime nodded in response.

”Do you still remember the storeroom at the second floor?”

The floor below the office of Hirasaka-gumi. I stepped into that place twice, and both of the times were for meaningless but unforgettable ceremonies.

”The spare T-shirts we kept there are gone.”

I swallowed as silently as I could. It’s unmistakable. It’s a planned crime. Obviously, someone wishes to frame Hirasaka-gumi.

”Who else holds the keys there?”

Alice asked with her back to us.

”Only me—“

Yondaime suddenly paused as he was talking. The words that he was about to say suddenly turned hesitant, a complicated expression on his face. What is this? Did he think of something?

”…… Yondaime? What is—“

”Nothing!”

Yondaime forcefully shook his head in answer, covering my voice

directly.

”I’m thinking of borrowing Major as well. I’m going to investigate the route of their entry. Actually looking down on us. We’re definitely going to dig them out!”

Leaving Alice and I, Yondaime left the detective agency alone. For a moment, only the sounds of the old air conditioners mixed with sounds of typing surrounded me.

When I turned around, Alice stopped typing to turn around as well. Our gaze met, while Alice seemed somewhat embarrassed, lowering her head to look at my knees.

”Are you still…… Going to accept the job Yondaime gave you?”

”Yes…… Why?”

”There is a case of violence, so I have a bad feeling about this. A sorrow that I cannot stop…… It is like I can hear the sounds of the vertical and horizontal lines weaving the fabric of this beautiful world being corroded, polluted.”

Though I couldn’t hear the sound that she spoke of, I could see what was hidden in Alice’s eyes. Helplessness the color of a corpse’s skin.

”Besides, in this incident, the malicious intent directed at our companions this time can be clearly felt.”

”…… Mnn.”

That’s right. All of the previous incidents ended in either tragedies or a good ending, not having the space for anyone to get involved. The people standing on the stage were only people who lost their ways and clowns.

But it’s different for this incident.

Someone is deliberately harming the others. Just thinking of it made me shiver.

”Even so, you still wish to—“

Halfway through her words, Alice turned to a side.

”Hmph! It is useless to speak of this to a money-faced person whose eyes can only focus on a high daily salary. I understand now.”

”No, I’m not really doing this for money.”

”Indeed, doing odd jobs at my office will not bring you any money, so it is fine no matter how much you neglect it. Even so, I will still not give you a fixed salary, as I have my modesty as a NEET as well.”

Please get rid of that modesty immediately. But why did she get so angry? It’s the first time I saw Alice like this. I slowly climbed up the bed, walking into Alice’s field of vision.

”Erm…… I think that Alice is very important as well?”

Alice’s face reddened in an instant just like a kaleidoscope that had a petal of rose thrown in.

”…… W- W- W- What are you talking about!?”

Alice jumped for quite a few times, going backwards while swinging her long hair.”

”W-, W- W- W-, What on earth are you doing!? Saying strange things like this all of a sudden!”

”Alice, wasn’t it you who said that I can’t neglect you?”

”That was not what I meant!”

Then what does it mean? Alice built a wall between us using a large number of dolls, shouting repeatedly behind it.

”My point is, you overlook even your own safety, so do you really have the right to worry about the others!”

”Ahhh…… I’m sorry. Sorry for making you worry every time.”

”I have never been worried for you in my whole life!”

The wall of dolls collapsed just like that.

”L- Listen well! The matter that I am worried about is whether the investment I made on you can be regained! Your debts are currently paid using your salary, do you not remember!?”

”I didn’t forget. Mnn, don’t worry.”

I picked up the bunny and dolphin dolls rolled onto the floor from the sheets and placed them by Alice’s side.

I am an assistant detective. For this place, and for this small detective, I must use up all the blood in my body.

Alice glared at me with a gaze as though she was about to burst into tears, and immediately turned around to face her keyboard again. Her black, silky hair flowed along with the movement of her head, gently touching the back of my hand.

After that, a window popped up on the monitor, signaling the completion of a software execution. That moment, the printer activated silently, printing out flyers with photos of the wanted suspects in order.

1. ↑ From my understanding, it’s something like a crossfade song, where many songs are mixed together.
2. ↑ A place where indie music can be freely played.
3. ↑ He’s explaining how his name is written. The word錬次 (Renji) is formed by the words 金（gold），東(east），次 (next time)

Chapter 2

After one passes by the large bus terminal filled with people and the scorching heat of summer, climbing a little of the slope extending towards the direction of the TV station and turns left, the broken down building where the headquarters of Hirasaka-gumi is located could be seen. The office and study forms the third floor, while the second floor would be a part-hall, part-store.

Today is the day after the incident happened at Akasaka. Yondaime and I decided to meet before the steel door on the second floor where I usually steer clear from. Though it was just ten in the morning or so, the blazing sunlight of July roasted the cement fall so much that it almost melted, while the steel door was so hot that an egg could almost be fried on it.

However, the summer heat was not the sole reason that caused discomfort. Each and every one of the members of Hirasaka-gumi lined up before the stairs in an orderly fashion, baring their upper torso, allowing their muscular bodies to be clearly seen.

”E- Erm…… Why are you all not wearing shirts?” Are you having a celebration or something? Your actions will intensify the greenhouse effect, so can you please stop that?

”Yes, sir! It’s our fault that the T-shirts were stolen!”

”We returned our shirts to Sou-san! We are too ashamed to wear them before we catch the criminal!”

”Aniki, please take a look. We put on sunblock in the shape of our emblem, so it’ll be the same as the time when we’re wearing the T-shirts after some time!”

I extended my hand to block the summer sunlight, tried not to let an expression of pity surface on my face after glancing at the sun, and turned around to look at Yondaime. I wonder what he had to do to collect so many idiots.

”If anything happens to me, I’ll count on you to handle these idiots. Allowing idiots to do as they like will cause a lot of troubles in society.”

”Definitely not! I’ll be the one troubled if so!”

Yondaime snorted in contempt after hearing my rebuttal. However, he suddenly looked at my chest with a solemn expression, stretching out his fist and thrust it at me. It was as though the touch reached my heart directly, while I couldn’t help but look back at Yondaime.

What’s with this? Is it possible that…… He was serious about that?

Fortunately, the third person who agreed to meet here— Major arrived soon after. A yellow-brown cap with a star-shaped badge appeared below the stairs, probably the camouflage uniform of the People’s Liberation Army used in the desert? After that, a man even shorter than me with skin as smooth as a primary school student’s appeared. The jet black military backpack he was carrying did not match him at all.

”What’s this? Having a simulation practice of a battle in the desert in broad daylight? Just as well, I’ve brought military knives enough for everyone, so let me distribute them.”

Major squinted at the gang members whose upper torsos were bare. As expected of the professional level military otaku.

”Absolutely not. I should tell you not to wander around with military knives, as the law is quite strict right now.”

”Relax. So that I can dispose of the evidence before the authorities find them, I’ve installed a time bomb on each of the daggers.”

”I can’t relax at all! A dangerous person like you should just hide in a laboratory forever!”

”But I’m here because of Souichirou’s request.”

”Ah— Uuu— That’s true.”

”He said that they’re knives that can explode!”

”I want it……” “On which desert would you need such a thing?”

”Idiots! Observe the outside closely, the vast desert of Tokyo!” Nude clan, can you please shut up?

”Listen closely, return upstairs, and also, put on some clothes!”

Yondaime’s orders immediately caused the lackeys to shut up, and he turned to Major, pointing at the steel door with his chin after that.

Though he looks like a child, similar to Alice, the specialized skills of Major in mechanical engineering cause even university professors to feel pity, because his skills were only used in criminal activities like taking photos secretly without permission, spying, survival games and illegal trespassing. Since they’re birds of a feather, that would be the main reason that he was recruited. Major squatted down before the keyhole, taking out what seemed to be a small magnifying glass. With the side that was fine as a funnel, he stuck it into the keyhole.

Not long after that, Major stood up as his face clouded over.

”Take a look at the windows as well.”

Yondaime nodded while opening the steel door. Eh? What’s wrong? Why didn’t you tell us the results of the investigation? I walked in while thinking in my heart. Since Alice already asked me to, I must remember to take some photos of the possible routes of entry.

Inside, there was an empty room with wooden floorboards. Apart from some tatami mats piled up at a corner of the room, there really wasn’t anything else. Opposite to us was the sliding door leading to the storeroom. The odor of what seemed to be pesticide spread out as soon as the door was opened. There were quite a few rolls of tatami mats propped on the wall, cardboard boxes stacked high, and even a few safety helmets used at construction sites hung on the hooks on the wall. Including the articles in the storeroom, sturdy bars of iron were installed on all of the windows.

Major shook his head after checking out three windows.

”Souichirou, were the T-shirts really placed here? Is it possible that someone in the gang took them for changing?”

”If I don’t say so, they won’t even know if there are holes on their own clothes.”

”Then what about the keys?”

”I keep it by my side.”

”Spare keys?”

”None present.”

”Isn’t it impossible that there aren’t any?”

”I’m telling you that there aren’t!”

I really don’t know how to describe the expression that surfaced on Yondaime’s face that moment. For example, it’s like a person tried hard for two days to make a bamboo raft, and realized only then that the sea already dried up— an expression like that.

”In any case, the keyhole doesn’t have any sign of damage.”

Major shrugged. According to him, tiny traces will always be left in the keyhole if one tries to force the lock open.

”Of course, there is a chance for traces not to be left if he’s an expert in illegal intrusions like me. Which means……”

Major looked somewhat triumphant.

”The person who did it would be me or Souichirou, one of the two.”

”You can go back now. I’ll clear the payment with Alice in one go, so you can get it from her that time.”

”I originally wanted to throw in a little deduction services. I really can’t stand an old Japanese relic like you.”

”I’ll call you if I need your help again, so beat it for today! And also, I can’t seem to contact Tetsu. Do you know where he is?”

”According to Tetsu-san, he hitched a free ride to Niigata for the summer horseraces.”

Yondaime made a ‘tut’ in impatience. Similar to Hiro-san and Major, Tetsu-senpai is one of the members of the NEET Detective Squad as well. His fighting skills might be equal or even more than Yondaime. For an unusual case like this, his skills would be reliable, but since he’s a fanatic gambler, whenever he checks in at a racetrack, he won’t return for at least two days.

”Anyways, I’ll tell you immediately when I come in contact with him.”

Major walked out of the room after saying that. That moment, a shout came from the other side of the shut steel door.

”Training start! Rollcall!”

”Shut up! Stop pretending to be an instructor, pipsqueak!” “Hurry up and give us the knives!”

The point different from Hiro-san and Tetsu-senpai is that Major is completely not respected by the Hirasaka-gumi members. I have a feeling that I heard an explosion as well, but I think it’s better to treat it as my imagination.

I looked at Yondaime once more. His hands were still stuck in his pockets, staring at the storeroom.

”The T-shirts…… I don’t think it’s that much of a special design, you might be able to buy it anywhere.”

”They’re all ordered. Even the size and position of the emblem is the same, so it’s unmistakable.”

”Even so…… That doesn’t mean that it can’t be replicated…… Right?”

As the uniform of Hirasaka-gumi is somewhat famous in this city, it

might have been photographed and replicated, or if someone finds one at the garbage dump of this building, they would be able to replicate it.

”I know that.”

Yondaime directly dropped the conversation.

Is it really true that nobody else has the keys to the room— For some reason, I just couldn’t ask that question.

When we walked out of the room, Major’s silhouette and the members of the muscle fest already disappeared. Shouts of the slogans ‘Hira—! Saka—!’ ‘Fight!’ ‘Hira—! Saka!’ ‘Fight!’ gradually became distant. Oi, is it possible that they ran outside without wearing shirts? They’d really get arrested, you know? Even so, Yondaime walked upstairs with his lips tightly clamped. As I felt that I haven’t gotten things clear, I planned to follow and was stepping on the second step of the staircase when Yondaime turned around.

”Hurry up and deal with your promotional work. You shouldn’t have time to meddle in a matter like this.”

”But…… I’m an assistant detective after all, so investigation about matters like this should be my true priority.”

”Shut up. Haven’t you watched the tape from the surveillance camera? A matchstick like you would be sent into the hospital if you get involved.”

”You don’t need to be that worried—“

”Nobody is being worried of you. As Alice lent you to me, it would affect my credibility if something happens…… What’s with your idiotic face!”

”Nothing, really…… I’m just curious why you have exactly the same reaction as Alice.”

Yondaime’s fists flashed before I even finished my words. Before I felt any pain, I experienced the sense that my body was floating and

the impact of my body crashing into something, all of the air in my body being spat out of my mouth, and I realized that I flew to the railings of the stairs because of the impact in the end. I stared to cough repeatedly, the taste of gastric acid in my mouth.

”Stop talking so much and scram to Ueno! I did a lot to ask the person in charge to extend the appointment.”

I rubbed my stomach while watching Yondaime leave. What’s with this?

But it seems like the words *‘Not being worried of you’* are true.

*

’I heard you’re going to Ueno! Go to the zoo for me along the way.’

When Alice called me, I was coincidentally looking at the lush lotus leaves floating on the Shinobazu Pond. The lotus leaves reflected the dazzling sunlight of summer, almost causing people to be unable to open their eyes.

”Erm…… Actually, I’m already at Ueno. Why the zoo?”

’To take photos of capybaras, of course! Aren't you still holding the digital camera? Remember to take a close shot of it so that I can feel its fluffy touch just from the photo. You can pat them in my place as well.’

”I’d rather not. I’m telling you that I’m very busy, having to go to both the advertising company and livehouses today.”

’Did you not say that you will not forget your job as an assistant detective? Even planaria remembers its own soul, but I never thought that you are inferior to even a low class species like this.’

Why must I be scolded like this……? Even so, at least I can still learn from my mistakes, thus I swallowed my complaint of *’How is this the job of an assistant detective?’* into my stomach. Besides, I got Alice into a bad mood just yesterday, so it made me feel more

relieved that she can treat me as usual now.

'Your appointment with the advertising company should be on twelve, while the appointment with the livehouse should start at five in the afternoon, is it not? Does that not mean that you have enough time to visit the zoo?'

"Eh? You're telling me to go there between meetings, and not after they end?"

'You really lack common sense. These animals will enter a slumbering state in the evening, and the zoo will have closed for the day by then.'

I don't want a hikkikomori NEET with an abnormal body, sleeping less than an hour a day to say that to me!

"My main point is, why must I take photos of capybaras? Aren't they just large, sleepy-looking rodents with prickly-looking fur? How is that good? And shouldn't we take photos of pandas if we go to Ueno?"

Alice's sounds of ridicule after hearing that had long exceeded the range that can be described in words, thus I am not planning to record it completely here.

'If you cannot understand the adorable appearance of a capybara, fine, but you actually have the nerve to mention pandas! If you can only experience the little charm owned by a black and white bear like that, you should just use bamboo as an offering during Obon and pray for it to be reborn! The pandas in Ueno have long died.'

"Eh? R- Really?"

But isn't a panda the mascot of Ueno up till now?

'That is why it has such a miraculous effect on people who lack information like you, because as the word suggests, the panda is just a mascot to attract customers. In any case, just focus on the capybara and remember to buy a doll of it along the way.'

After that, I had to suffer over ten minutes of instructions with meticulous details on the phone, such as from which angle should I

film it from until how many photos I should take, but Alice still hung up while sighing in the end. Uh oh, it's almost time for my appointment with the designer.

In the end, the appearance of a dancing capybara kept surfacing in my mind during the meeting, and my concentration was quite bad from the start. Actually, part of it was because the workshop of the advertising company was too messy, dolls piled up on cabinets and the desks, causing me to recall Alice's words no matter where I looked. The designer in charge is a young lady called Mika-san. She dyed her hair blonde, wore long fake eyelashes, put on thick mascara, painted all of her fingernails, and spoke in the tone of a high school girl, all in all the type that I am the worst at dealing with. It was hard for me to speak while looking in her eyes.

"Fujishima-san, you were the one who designed the website? It's brilliant, totally brilliant! It's simple, and is a top hit on internet search engines!"

Though she should be older than me, I almost got pummeled by the sense of youth she was radiating.

"Why don't you just refine the logo of the band as well, Fujishima-san? I think the concept of the original design is okay, just that it doesn't give people much of an impression."

"Me? No, erm……"

"This is the logo designed by the drummer of the band, but the focus is a bit…… Since they're a girl band, the deliberate emphasis of the cute feeling of kitsch and pop seems to be somewhat of a mismatch. Fujishima-san, have you listened to their songs before? Didn't they give more of a sharp, strained sort of feeling?"

I just feel that her words seem to be somewhat reasonable, so I just nodded for now.

"Ah, but I'm hoping that you will keep the bird, as the whole design is based on the bird."

Wait a minute, please don't speak like I'm definitely accepting the request! While thinking of that, I stared at the paper spread on the reception table. On the logo of the band that was formed by English alphabets, the dot on the letter 'i' was replaced with the picture of a small bird. Such a design is indeed somewhat cute.

That moment, I suddenly thought of something and asked:

"Shouldn't there be merchandise of T-shirts made? They probably aren't finished yet, are they?"

"We're probably dealing with this next month, as the rights of the merchandise are too complicated!"

"It's like this, I know a friend working in a shop selling second hand clothes. The shop is called 'Alan Garba[1]', and it became quite famous recently."

Though I'm saying that he's a friend, the truth is Alice and I did the owner of the shop a large favor during a case before this. Describing that case would take up a long time, so please allow me to explain this some time after this. When she heard the name of the shop, Mika-san's eyes suddenly brightened.

"Yes, I know! I went there a few times. I heard that it reopened recently, right?"

"So won't it achieve a promotional effect if we add the band logo and date of the event onto the shirt and sell it everywhere?"

Mika-san started to dance in joy. It's somewhat worrisome for me to see her express her rich emotions so readily.

"Okay, let's do just that! Ah, but…… What to do? It wouldn't work if we don't start from now, do we? If we design it right away and send it to a manufacturer, that would be……"

"I know a manufacturer as well, though it's a different person."

"Ehhh—!?"

Mika-san leaned forward while supporting her hands on the table in

surprise. I opened the website of Wakagi Crafts Store, Yoshiki-san's store, using a notebook. The range of their products is actually too widespread for a 'crafts store', having self-made original accessories and even accepting orders from clients. The introduction page of the products listed out samples of unique accessories in exotic or Japanese style, textiles and embroideries.

"That's won~derful! The designer is really good. What? You know him? Fujishima-san, what are you, really? A mere high school student being acquainted with Sou-san is already inconceivable, but you actually have contacts everywhere!"

…… What am I, huh? I want to know that as well.

However, Mika-san already picked up her phone and dialed the number of Wakagi Crafts Store when I was about to explain that I don't know if Yoshiki-san will accept the order.

"….. Hello, I am…… The reason I called you is because I wish for you to help with the design of some clothes. With Hinamura Souichirou-san…… That's right, Fujishima-san introduced you to me…… Yes, yes, that's right, uwaaa, really!? Yes, yes, that's the band, yes, yes……"

I really wish to emulate her ability to take action. While thinking of that, I started to worry about the complicated rights of the merchandise that we spoke of just now. Is it really okay for us to decide things in private like this?

"Then I'll get Fujishima-san on the phone!"

The phone was stuffed into my hands, and I took it in surprise and apprehension.

"Erm…… Fujishima speaking. Fujishima Narumi."

'Narumi-kun? It's been a while…… Not really.'

Yoshiki-san's gentle voice that was slightly hoarse could make people relax just by listening to it. Though I was suddenly forced to pick up the phone, it's a good thing that I didn't say anything embarrassing.

”So sorry, it turned out like this all of a sudden…… Well, asking you to handle such a thing though we just met once……”

’It’s okay, really. It’s my pleasure to accept jobs concerning clothes. As for the design, shouldn’t we arrange for a meeting to discuss about it?’

”That’s right. Of course, it’d be the quicker the better. When would it be more convenient for you?”

’Any time would do, just that I might need you to visit the shop. Very sorry, because I can’t go too far away.’

Ah, that’s right. He can’t just leave the shop there.

’It’s related to Hina’s job, right? Can you bring him along as well? It was the first time I saw him so shy, it’s just too interesting.’

Oh, so he was being shy that time? They say that a dog owner can discern the expression of a dog when he rears it for a long time, so perhaps it’s the same for wolves?

”Erm…… I don’t want to die yet, so let’s forget about it for now. Yondaime is probably busy right now as well.”

Right after I said that, hearty laughter came from the other side of the phone.

I returned the receiver to Mika-san, and she hung up after confirming the details of the project.

While walking out of the workshop, Mika-san’s face clouded over, and asked me in a low voice:

”Yesterday, I heard someone say that Sou-san’s team is involved in strange issues. Apparently, it has something to do with violence……”

”Ahhh, well…… Erm, that incident……”

Though the police weren’t called, news of the incident indeed spread quickly, giving me slight discomfort. I stood in a daze at my original spot for quite some time, mumbling to myself, and spoke

again after that:

”I think it’s unrelated to Yondaime and Hirasaka-gumi. It doesn’t matter.”

In the end, what I blurted out were polite words of consolation.

In my opinion, there is nothing more sorrowful than heading towards the zoo below the blazing summer sun.

From the time I lined up at the entrance to buy tickets, there were already quite a few happy families wearing straw hats passing by, while I had to do my best to explain things to the oba-san at the ticket office: “Please give me a receipt for the ‘NEET Detective Agency’. Well…… N- E- E- T- Detective- Agency……” I feel like dying.

As the discussion we had at the advertising company took longer than I expected, there really wasn’t much time until the appointment with the livehouse. After setting the alarm of my phone to ring after an hour, I first headed to the souvenir corner to buy a listless-looking set of capybara dolls stacked together, asking for a receipt for that as well. The female cashier’s smile was painful to me.

I don’t wish to slowly admire the animals on a hot day like this, so I immediately dashed towards the place where the capybaras were located after confirming its location on a signboard. Along the way, I brushed past various couples and kids with their skin dark because of the sun, faintly hearing the conversation of the people that had no content. *The penguins are so cute…… The polar bears are so cute…… A pity that there aren’t any pandas now, but at least the lesser pandas are cute……*

At the section with llamas and tapirs, there was a clump of an animal that could be held in one’s hands, while another smaller fellow could be seen beside it, probably a capybara family. The expression of the capybaras seemed to be innocent and naive, apart from the llamas and tapirs living with them, they were even

frightened by crows flying in, and could only walk alone. I hurriedly took photos of the scene with the multi-functional digital camera that Alice lent me, and suddenly felt that the camera was somewhat wet. I thought that it was because of my sweat, but I only realized after turning my face away that they were my tears. I felt like crying more because of that.

I thought to myself, so the capybaras live on the world so resiliently as well. Llamas eat grass, tapirs eat dreams, while capybaras live on by eating the sorrows of uninteresting, unimportant people like me. A mystifying emotion assaulted me like pouring rain. If I continued to stay by the fence, I would definitely stand there, unable to move, so I silently packed up the camera, leaving the animals.

When I walked towards the exit, I suddenly thought of something. The designer seemed to have told me that the bird on the band logo was called…… What is it again? A black thrush? Perhaps it can be found in the zoo? Would a photo of the real thing be helpful when I discuss about this with Yoshiki-san? Thinking of that, I immediately walked towards the park navigation signboard again.

The cage for bird species that was about four-storey high was filled with branches, while the ones in it were all raptors. I inquired the ojisan that seemed to be the manager there about the matter.

”Thrush? Black thrush? Hmm— We probably don’t have this. There’s a section for common birds in Japan, so there’s probably white’s thrush if you’re looking for it.”

He said while fanning his face with his hat.

”Black thrushes usually aren’t imported to Japan, as they’re not really rare in Europe. For instance, black thrushes in England would be like sparrows in Japan.”

So things are like that? That can’t be helped then, I have no other choice but to check online. It’s just that photos of common items are usually hard to find online.

”Are black thrushes popular right now? Because of a puppet show or something?”

”Eh?”

”A young man asked me if there are black thrushes here just now as well. Ah, look, the young man over there.”

I looked in the direction that he gestured at with his chin and saw a tall man whose hands were on the railings by the penguin cage. Having an extremely distinct streak of blonde on his hair, and that shirt— that’s right, it was the shirt that I bought before this.

”…… Renji…… san?”

There was some distance between me and the penguin cage, and the birds there were chirping loudly, but even so, the man seemed to have heard my call, turning around to face me. With quite some effort, I saw the widened eyes hidden by the goggles-shaped sunglasses. That’s right, it was indeed Renji-san.

”Whaddya know, if it ain’t Narumi—!?”

After saying that, Renji-san immediately approached in large steps, grabbing my shoulders.

”This ain’t just an unexpected meetin’! I never thought I would see ya in the zoo!”

Me too. What on earth were you doing?

”T-shirt! My T-shirt, did ya take it, Narumi? I went back to Dotoru for a spin, but didn’t find it.”

”Ah, t- that’s right.” Eh? I recall that I took it back, but where did I place it again?

”The shirt is very important to me. I cried for three days when I thought I lost it, good thing—! Thanks!”

Renji-san held my shoulders while shaking me forcefully in gratitude, while the oji-san left with a shallow smile that said *’thoughi’mnotsurewhatyou’redoingitseemslikeyou’rebusysodoyourbest’*.

”Seriously, I was really worried of ya. Actually draggin’ ya into a

fight, but not knowing yer number, while ya have a really bland look that I probably won't notice even though ya passed by me, givin' off a feeble aura like yer gonna kick the bucket after three days because of food poisoning……"

"None of your business!" Though I thought someone was finally caring about me, but it turned out to be like that in the end!

Renji-san took out a pen and copied my phone number onto his palm. It seemed like he doesn't have a cellphone.

However, I had a strange feeling about this in my heart— how did we meet again in such a short time in an incredibly huge place like Tokyo? Perhaps this is what they mean by a bad tie can be formed in just a short time? When I think about the time when we got separated, we were talking about odd topics like trying to be friends, reaffirming if it would get destroyed……

It won't be strange even if our relationship turns sour.

I couldn't ask immediately about the matters that I didn't manage to finish that day, and was thinking if I should continue the chat in a place like this…… In the end, we still talked about meaningless trivialities.

"Erm…… When should I return the T-shirt to you? And what are you doing, Renji-san?"

"Lookin' at penguins, polar bears…… And exotic animals such as lonely high school students who seem to have nothin' to do in the afternoon."

"Shut up! You don't have the right to say that to me at all! I was asking about your occupation!"

"As ya can see, I'm a NEET."

That's true. I'm the dumb one for asking a question like this. I can sense a presence similar to Hiro-san and Tetsu-senpai's coming from him, and was thinking if it would be true. However, I really don't want to imagine that I'm turning into a NEET detector, and that was why I asked him about his job while wishing that he had a proper

occupation.

”I actually had another task for comin’ to Ueno, but I came to the zoo since it’s such a rare opportunity. Since I just found out that the name of a band that I’m takin’ note of means black thrush, I came here to see what kinda bird it is. And there ain’t no bird like that here in the end.”

I couldn’t help but stare at Renji-san once more.

Doesn’t that mean…… It’s the same reason as mine? It seems like not all of this is a coincidence. So the origin of that band’s name is so famous? Though they’re just an indie band, and haven’t been exposed at too many public events……

”And they said that there ain’t any pandas as well, dead, apparently. A lesser panda is now actually livin’ in the cage for the panda, making me think that Rin Rin[2] turned brown after gettin’ older and even split into two!”

Yeah, right.

”Tokyo changed a lot as well.”

Looking at the surface of the water that the sea lions were in, a lonely expression appeared on Renji-san’s face.

”…… You’re originally from Tokyo as well, right? How long did you go to Kansai for?”

Renji-san stared at me after pushing his goggle-styled sunglasses upwards. Unexpectedly, his gaze was that of one who was moved to tears.

”Did I ever tell you that I came from Tokyo?”

”Ah, no…… Isn’t that right? I just feel like your Kansai slang is somewhat unnatural.”

That’s right, I finally remembered. The impression that this person gives me is neither similar to Tetsu-senpai nor Hiro-san……

”It’s more like you’re deliberately speaking it to ease the atmosphere.”

He resembles Yondaime more. If Yondaime tries from the start till the end to make people laugh……

He would probably turn out like Renji-san.

Because his true gaze hidden by the shades was like that of a wild wolf.

”I once lived at Kansai as well, so I knew it when I heard it. Renji-san, your Kansai slang would be mixed with standard Japanese when you’re not careful, isn’t that right? It would be the exact opposite if it were to be people who grew up in Kansai. They would sound like they’re speaking in standard Japanese, but Kansai intonation would sometimes slip into it.”

I only noticed then that my tone was rather self-righteous, and suddenly felt flustered.

”E- Erm…… If it’s not that—“

”It ain’t wrong that I came from Tokyo. I was still livin’ here until four or five years ago. Though ya look like a dopey capybara, yer particularly sharp in strange aspects.”

Renji-san laughed while lightly thrusting at my chest with his fist. That was the first time I saw Renji-san smile naturally as well.

”Even so, I actually didn’t go to Kansai either. Just loitered around the Chiba district.”

I shook my head, troubled. If so, why does he speak in Kansai slang?”

”Because I borrowed money here and there, becomin’ a jobless bum in the end. Chiba is much warmer.”

”Erm…… Why didn’t you stay at your old home then?”

”My parents were gone long ago.”

Ah, I see. I frankly accepted the truth and leaned my back against the railings, while I stared at the primary school girls walking out of the seating area while holding shaved ice in excitement.

Renji-san looked at my face with his head cocked.

"…… What a strange fellow. Don'cha have more ta ask?"

"More to ask?"

"Usually, people would at least say that they're sorry for askin' about this. Was it because of an illness? Or an accident…… Something like that."

"But don't you find someone asking you such a question annoying?"

Renji-san's eyes twinkled, and he had his back on the penguins after putting on his sunglasses. A few kids shouting in excitement passed by us, and then only the blurry, weakening sun of the afternoon sun in summer and the faint odor of animal waste remained.

Renji-san spoke suddenly:

"Narumi, yers were gone as well?"

I looked at my feet with my head lowered.

He can see it? From such a short conversation?

Perhaps he really could see it? I think it's possible that we've experienced the same matters, swallowing our sense of discomfort. I suddenly felt somewhat uncomfortable. Is it possible that I spoke too bluntly, angering Renji-san because of that? *'Don't you find someone asking you such a question annoying?'* I might feel displeasure when I'm asked such a question, as it's rather selfish after all. It's like a wound in one's mouth, and would hurt no matter whether you touch it with your tongue or your teeth.

"…… My mother already passed away. My dad doesn't come back often."

"Ya don't seem like yer good at taking care of yerself, what to do?"

Renji-san asked with a wry smile, giving me a sense of relief more or less.

”I have a sister as well. She’s much more competent than me. And dad still gives us money for our daily expenses.”

”Yer definitely on the way to become a NEET.”

Even a person I met for the second time feels that? I’m really starting to worry for my future.

”Your dad…… Did he love you?”

”…… Why ask this all of a sudden?”

”No particular reason. When I grew up, my old man already ran away with another woman, so I don’t get it. I’m curious of how fathers treat their kids.”

”I’m not sure as well. But basically, they would probably love them.”

”Whoa! An unexpected answer.”

”Because, people say that the love from parents is unconditional love without asking anything in return.”

”Stop speakin’ lines that would give people goosebumps in a news broadcaster’s tone.”

”I heard this from other people as well. They say that children are gathered in a certain room in heaven before they are given birth, everyone having happy, fluffy days, but the parents pulled us down from there without permission and gave birth to us. If they aren’t so nosy, we wouldn’t suffer on the ground at all, and don’t need to face death.”

”What are ya talkin’ about?”

That’s right, what am I talking about? Even I wanted to do a tsukkomi on myself. In such sunny weather, under the gaze of birds from the north-most and south-most places of earth, I……

”I’m just explaining why parents have the obligation of raising children.”

”I’m not that bright, so put it in a simpler way.”

”Well…… That means, parents owe their children from the time they give birth to them, so giving them unconditional love is reasonable…… Something like that.”

Renji-san looked at me with a gaze as though he was looking at the timetable from the other side of the railway station platform.

”Narumi, ya usually think about these things? If so, I can understand why your pop doesn’t want to go home then.”

”Indeed, I often thought about things like this when I skipped classes before this. As for now…… Probably not.”

”Why? Ya became happy, so ya don’t need to continue to play the fool there?”

Renji-san poked the side of my abdomen with his elbow while speaking in a jokingly tone. Even so, shouldn’t the truth be something like that? I met a lot of people, making me a little…… Though it’s only a little, I still had some growth.

”So ya’d think I’m kind no matter how much I joke? How mature you are.”

”Please be more modest since you understand that!”

Renji-san raised his head to look at the blazing sun of July that had long set and laughed. After that, he bought two cups of beverages at the vendor’s and walked back.

”I’ll treat ya to a drink, and we’re even.”

”So I’m so cheap in your eyes?”

”Narumi, I specially bought a large one for ya.”

”Thank you so much then!”

I snatched the paper cup from Renji-san's hands. At the instant when I bit the straw, Renji-san asked suddenly:

"Narumi, did ya live around here five years ago as well?"

"…… No. My dad often transfers to other posts. Though I don't really remember the location, it's probably not in Tokyo."

"So I didn't have the chance to meet ya at all."

"Meet…… what?"

"If I met a person like ya that time, I might not have left Tokyo……"

Renji-san mumbled. "…… And I might not return like this as well."

To be honest, this person looks more fragile when he's wearing his sunglasses.

"Actually, I didn't wanna come back at the start. Forget it…… I found an interesting fellow anyway. I'll just write it off."

Renji-san held his paper cup again, showing his teeth, but it was a lonely smile.

What was the reason that caused him to abandon Tokyo, and what was the reason that caused him to return again?

"…… You really don't have any friends over here?"

Though I knew that it was a cruel question, I still had to reaffirm it.

"Yeah. Well, a lot of fair-weather friends, but no true friend. Every one of them are just moneyless, jobless, unreliable NEETs."

"That's because you keep saying something like trying to be friends."

"Perhaps."

Renji-san's laughter sounded like the front tire of a bike turning in the air.

”…… That’s why I’m telling you that you don’t need to try to be friends. Erm…… I might not be free any time because of my work, but since it’s the summer break right now, you can call me if you’re free.”

”Yer gonna let me borrow cash?”

”No! I meant that I can accompany you if you want to shop anywhere!”

Renji-san lightly patted my shoulders with his lips curled slightly. I thought, perhaps that’s his original smile?

”Duh. I still have to get back my T-shirt. And if I’m lackin’ a mahjong partner, I’ll call ya out even if it’s late night.”

”I’ll pass, that will trouble me very much.”

”Not just trying to be friends, ain’t it? It’s true, right?”

He suddenly looked at me seriously, making me swallow before nodding in answer.

I suddenly thought, was he once betrayed before this? If not, he probably shouldn’t be so suspicious. However…… Why isn’t he like the me before this, cooped up in his own world? Is it because he is a person that can’t do even this, lonely to the extreme?

”Then, Narumi……”

Renji-san pressed the white paper cup enveloped with numerous beads of water near to my face.

”…… What is it?”

”It’s like this. Narumi, your hand, like this…… cross it over here.”

I blankly followed Renji-san’s instructions, our hands holding the cups hooked together.

”And then drink it.”

When the both of us touched our straws with our mouths, our hands formed a chain-like ring.

I know this ritual— and indeed became sworn brothers with someone as well.

”Though we can’t be born on the same year, month and day…… Something like that. There should’ve been witnesses, a mediator and all that, but let’s just ask the polar bear to be our mediator. Only animals won’t lie after all.”

Renji-san finished his whole cup of cola after finishing.

”Well, from the bottom of my heart— I don’t believe in a thing like friends.”

Renji-san’s voice disappeared in the air between us along with the bubbles in the carbonated water.

”So….. That’s why we’re becoming sworn brothers, huh?”

”So ya know that?”

I didn’t know what to say anymore. That was a ritual that appeared in the movie ‘Ben-Hun’— though it’s not really from the movie, but just a way to express friendship between men when having a toast. That’s right, it means—

I can’t just say that he’s related to Yonadime.

However……

”I know that losin’ friends was mostly my fault.”

Renji-san said while scrunching his paper cup.

”I was hesitant, without self-restraint, and I don’t think before I speak as well. Before this, I had a great friend in Tokyo, but thinkin’ that I would probably break all connections with him because of a small matter, I would feel sad. So, how should I say this, that’s why I’m thinkin’ it’s better to at least leave a form.”

I stared at the hard cup that was gradually warming while emitting gas bubbles.

”I thought that no matter how long I live, I probably won’t be able to have a more important friend than that guy. That’s why I thought we should directly become sworn brothers.”

”In the end—“ My throat was suddenly dry. “Did something…… Happen?”

”Ah ha ha! In the end, it was as I expected, we got in a fight and broke off all connections. After that, we could only say goodbye to the idiotic game of loyalty of being sworn brothers. Well, a fate like this is probably destined for me.”

I couldn’t help but feel from the bottom of my heart that it’s a good thing Renji-san was still wearing his sunglasses. If I saw the despair accumulated in his eyes, I probably would have run away from the scene.

”For some reason, now I have to make a mess of the guy, comin’ back to Tokyo especially for this. What’s with this? Why do I…… Every time……”

Each and every word that Renji-san spoke fell on the burning asphalt, as though they’re being burnt. He shook his head and swallowed them again.

”Sorry for makin’ ya play this game with me. Thanks!”

”…… No, there’s no need.”

”Let’s just treat this as a dream before the wine dries up. Ya probably won’t wanna get close to me after this, isn’t that right, Narumi?”

”Of course not!”

Sh- Should I say something right now? But what to say? Though I just drank some cola, my mouth was parched. As I was trying to think of something to say, the phone in my pocket started to vibrate. It was my alarm. Uh oh, it’s almost time for my

appointment. What should I do? I still have a lot to say to Renji-san. Is he really related to Hirasaka-gumi? I recall that I heard something about Hirasaka-gumi when the men in piercings at the livehouse in Harajuku were looking for a fight with him. It was indeed not just my imagination.

”Do ya have another appointment?”

Renji-san asked while throwing the flattened paper cup precisely into the trash can a few meters away.

”Eh? Ah, no…… Yes, I need to go to a livehouse right now, well……”

”Livehouse?”

Renji-san approached solemnly once more. My face turned somewhat pale, but I still squeezed out the name of the livehouse, while Renji-san’s brows immediately locked at that moment.

”It’s best if ya don’t go there.”

”…… Eh?”

”Just don’t. Ya can’t go there today.”

”W- Why?”

”Just don’t.”

It was as though Renji-san’s words pierced into my heart, and an indescribably odd feeling remained between my ribs even after he left.

After I exited the zoo and was walking along the path by Shinobazu Pond, I kept thinking of Renji-san. Though he said all that, I can’t just not go, so I still headed towards the livehouse.

I felt some discomfort in my heart. Though there were some good ways to confirm Renji-san’s connection with Hirasaka-gumi, while

the simplest one would be to call Yondaime and ask him directly, I just couldn't do it.

If I just ignored it, he's just a strange older friend that I got to know coincidentally on a hot summer day.

Just ignoring the matter seems to be the best way of handling the matter.

Thus, I let the numerous questions that were like entangled seaweed swirl on my tongue, being unable to spit it out or swallow it, and directly stepped into the crowd at the American street of Ueno, walking in the direction of Okachimachi after passing by the railways.

And just because of that, I didn't notice that there were sirens ringing.

Piercing red sirens hurriedly dashed past the right part of my vision. It was a fire engine. I saw black smoke puffing out of the building that I was headed for the moment I raised my head. Shocked by the scene before me, I immediately fished out the map that I printed before this from my pocket and reaffirmed it.

Indeed, it was the building where the livehouse was at. I quickened my footsteps, but the people crowding out from the shops nearby to watch blocked the small road, causing me to be unable to move. I tried to push away the crowd, and finally arrived before the building after some painstaking effort. Puffs of thick smoke came from the stairs leading to the basement, and a few young men and women could be seen climbing out of it while coughing.

"Please go back a bit! Back!"

"Hey! There's a power shortage inside right now!"

"Let the injured pass by first!"

Voices of firefighters or the ambulance crew could be heard, but I anxiously stared at the signboard at the side of the entrance to the building. I am certain that the first floor of the basement is the livehouse where I am headed to, and I hurried over after seeing a

crowd of people who seemed to be the employees wearing red, open-collared shirts squatting down on the asphalt road.

”E- Erm…… I’m Fujishima who called yesterday, the one who asked for a meeting with you!”

A man whose hair was tied in a ponytail raised his head to look at me with a gaunt expression.

”…… Meeting? Hey you, it’s obvious that this isn’t the time to be talking about something like this.”

”What happened over here?”

”God knows.” “The power failed all of a sudden—“ “Seems like someone in the kitchen spilled something.”

”Someone damaged the power distribution board!” A man that seemed to be an employee as well rushed out from the thick flames, shouting at the firefighters with his face full of tears and soot. The power distribution board was damaged? What’s with this? What in the world happened?

”It’s just a small fire, so it’s fine!” “The fire has been put out now.”

”There are still quite a few people trapped in the lift! Please save them first!”

Numerous piteous shouts interweaved in the air, while Renji-san’s voice resounded in my mind—

’Just don’t. Ya can’t go there today.’

A thing like this— How is it possible? Per haps…… He was referring to this matter?

I hugged the bag containing the doll while squatting down by the road. Silhouettes in silver firefighters’ clothes kept passing by my view, and I was even stepped on by them at times, but Renji-san’s words, wolf-like smile, normal smile and the taste of the cola we drank kept swirling in my mind. Not only the roars of the firefighters, pain, and odd atmosphere, I couldn’t even feel my own

heartbeat.

It was not until sounds of emergency braking rang and heat from an exhaust pipe blew on my face that I came back to my senses. When I raised my head, my whole field of vision was filled with a luscious blue. I have an impression of this— it was a car very familiar to me. After that, the door of the driver opened, while a silhouette wearing a beige coat and suit pants dashed out.

”Narumi-kun! Phew, it’s a good thing that we found you so quickly!”

”…… Hiro…… san?”

Why is Hiro-san here? I haven’t recovered completely yet. After looking at my surroundings, I found that I was before a rolling door by the road at a slight distance from the building that was on fire. How long did I go in a trance for? Though the spectators surrounding the scene already disappeared, the entrance to the building was still sealed with tape, while policemen in uniforms could be seen at the scene as well.

”Are you hurt? You’re inside just now, right, Narumi-kun?”

”N- No. When I arrived, it was already—“

The back door of the car opened while shaking, shocking me out of words. In her pajamas and long, knee-length socks, without even wearing shoes, Alice was trying to use her weak hands to push open the door, preparing to walk on the road.

”W- Wait a minute!”

I hastily sprang up, running towards the car and pushing Alice inside.

”W- Why are you here, Alice?”

”You actually have the nerve to ask me ‘why’!?”

Sitting on the car seat, Alice looked at me with her tearful eyes while holding her fists on my chest.

”I called you when I saw the news about the fire, but not only did you not answer the phone, your GPS signal was completely motionless at the scene, and you still have the nerve to ask me why!?”

”Ahh……” I stretched my hand into my pocket. So there was a call — but I didn’t notice it vibrating at all.

”A person like you, a person like you! I thought that you would get burnt to a crisp, and was thinking of checking out if your brain would melt like butter so that your thoughts would be smoother, but you were actually just hugging your knees, practicing how to be a tramp by the road, it really made me so speechless that I do not know how to scold you!!”

Alice, who should have been speechless to the extent that she couldn’t talk, was instead giving me a rapid-fire scolding, shedding tears while scolding as well, making my mind sink into confusion as though it was about to spit fire, so I could only push Alice back into her seat, while I entered the car and locked the car as well. It won’t be nice if people saw or heard anything about this. Hiro-san returned to the driver’s seat as well and buckled his seatbelt.

”It really gave me a huge shock. Calling me to Hanamaru Ramen all of a sudden, and Alice actually ran to the ramen shop in an attire like that.”

”Hiro! Idiot! Do not speak out of turn!”

Alice pounded on the back of the driver’s seat while shedding tears, while I just felt that it was somewhat unbelievable while staring at the NEET detective whose face was red because of crying.

Though she’s just a serious hikkikomori who will feel shortness of breath when she goes outdoors.

”E- Erm…… I’m sorry. Sorry for making you worried about me.”

”How many times do you want me to repeat this!? A matter that is a waste of time like being worried about you is definitely not allowed to exist in my life!”

Alice repeatedly hammered my thigh.

”T- The matter that was worried of…… Uuuuu…… Was the capybara doll that I told you to buy!”

”Okay…… Fine……”

If she keeps worrying about an incompetent assistant like me, it wouldn’t be enough no matter how many hearts she has. Just thinking of it made me feel apologetic.

”Erm…… The doll is fine. I remembered to buy it, it’s fine and well.”

When Alice saw the coffee-colored object that had three layers that I took out from the plastic bag, she suddenly got angry, flying into a rage.

”This one is Mr. Capybara, not a capybara, you nitwit! Though I have known for a long time that you cannot even differentiate the full moon and a melon bun, I never thought that it is actually serious to this extent!”

”Huh? Eh? What? Isn’t this just a capybara?”

”They’re completely different! This is just a cartoon merchandise created using the doodle of a person who does not know of capybaras! The one that I want is the one who resembles the real one with an over-square nose!”

Alice was so furious that her whole face reddened, and she pranced on her seat while I was completely speechless. What the heck? Aren’t they about the same? Hiro-san smiled wryly while saying: “I’m going to drive soon, so help Alice to buckle her seatbelt.” As the car suddenly accelerated, my body was pushed back onto the seats. I only noticed at that moment that my heart was pounding quite seriously.

”Disregard Mr. Capybara for now, hurry up and report to me what happened at the scene. Do you know the reason for the fire? Was it done by the people who claimed to be from Hirasaka-gumi?”

”Ahh……”

I choked over my own voice.

That’s right. There is such a possibility. I heard someone say that the power distribution board was deliberately damaged……

That moment, the image that gave off piercing sounds of friction and odor of metal gradually formed a concrete film in my mind.

Renji-san once mentioned the band that Yondaime and I are in charge of promoting, and made a strange response to the name of the livehouse. Which means—

Our reunion at Ueno was not a coincidence.

The scorching sunlight, taste of cola that remained on my lips, and the warmth of Renji-san’s wrist when our hands crossed gradually awoken from my memories, while I started to tremble because of a chill. I think it isn’t just because of the strong air conditioning on the car.

I really don’t wish to believe this. But…… All of the deductions match.

My phone rang— just in my pocket.

”…… Hello?”

’You’re at Ueno, right? Did you see the fire? Was the damage serious?’

Yondaime’s voice at the other side of the phone was unexpectedly calm.

”No, when I reached the scene, it was already…… The fire didn’t seem to be too big. I heard that there was a power failure, and the power distribution board seemed to be damaged as well.”

I gulped. I should tell him about Renji-san as well, but how should I say it? I don’t have any concrete evidence, and nobody actually saw who did it as well.

Anyhow, I must think of a way to say it. When I was about to speak, Yondaime started first:

'Did you see it?'

"…… See what?"

'I'm asking you if you saw the person who ran away after damaging the power distribution board!'

"N- No. I don't even know who damaged it……"

'That's fine. You don't need to mind about this anymore.'

Yondaime's voice was like a small bubble that drifted to the surface from the bottom of a sea full of oil, deep and turbid.

"…… Eh?"

'I'm telling you to just take care of the promotions! I caught a whiff of the people who took the T-shirts now. You and Alice should just keep out of this.'

"You caught them? Who— Who did it?"

Bleached hair and goggles-shaped sunglasses surfaced in my mind once again.

'None of your business!'

"W- Wait a minute, please wait!"

He hung up. I blankly stared at the silent phone on my palm for awhile, and my gaze then wandered in the car full of air conditioning.

I only stopped when I met Alice's gaze.

I closed the phone as though I was about to crush it.

"The person who did it last time…… He said that he found him. Yondaime told us not to meddle anymore."

How on earth did he find him? Only two days passed from the day.

”The wanted poster that I made yesterday has already spread through the whole Yamanote Line. Besides, they are in an organization as well. Hirasaka-gumi will definitely find them if they use all of their men. As for you, what do you wish to do?”

What to do? Perhaps I should just do as Yondaime said, ignoring the piteous cries and sirens, continuing with my promoting job?

How could I do a thing like this?

”I want to talk directly to Yondaime. Hiro-san, I’m very sorry, but can you let me go off the car near the station before going back to Hanamaru Ramen?”

Hiro-san nodded in answer while staring at the windscreen.

”I’ll send you directly to their office.”

”Well…… But you have to hurry up and send Alice back.”

The NEET detective who has a serious ‘outdoors-phobia’ cannot stay out of her office for a long time. However, Alice tightly hugged her capybara doll until it changed shape, softly saying in a rigid tone near Hiro-san’s neck:

”I am going as well.”

I was taken back and kept staring at Alice, but was answered with a glare in the end.

”Even if you go there alone, you will be chased back by Yondaime immediately We must use up all of our sophistry so that they will accept the legitimacy of letting us know of the message.”

”On the phone—“

”Narumi-kun, if you go alone, Yondaime might beat you to death. She’s probably worried of you going there alone.”

”I am not worried! Hiro, please shut up!”

Hiro-san did not answer her, but just pretended not to hear her words while stepping on the accelerator.

”Didn’t I tell you not to meddle?”

Yondaime sat behind his desk in the Hirasaka-gumi office, a look of displeasure on his face. Though it was already summer, he was wearing a coat embroidered with a Chinese dragon, and that meant that he already entered the state of war preparation.

”Nee-san, Aniki, Ojiki, thanks for your hard work!” “Thanks for your hard work!”

Members of Hirasaka-gumi lined up at the two sides of the room, and greeted us in a low voice with their heads lowered when Alice, Hiro-san and I walked inside. Though it’s the same every time, I really wish they wouldn’t do that. It’s a good thing that they’re at least wearing clothes today. As they were forbidden to wear the uniform before the incident ended, all of them were wearing different personal clothing today.

”Why is even Alice here? In pajamas, as well.”

Separated by the desk, Yondaime glared furiously at Alice’s small body.

”I am a detective, and I accepted a request. There is nothing more important than this.”

Though her tone was still self-righteous, Alice was hugging the doll with her left hand, clutching on my sleeve with her right while trembling non-stop behind me. It seems like she lingered outside too long.

”Who cares about your rubbish reasons. I just requested you to analyze the photos, wasn’t the matter long resolved? We caught a grunt thanks to you. I’ll deposit the money for you next week, so hurry up and get back to your ice vault.”

Alice’s small hand tightly held my wrist. It was unclear as her skin was just too white, but her face paled long ago.

They caught a grunt already. Does that mean they caught one of the people making trouble in the name of Hirasaka-gumi so quickly? It seems like I’ve underestimated Yondaime’s mobility too much.

”Does that mean…… Your request has ended?”

”Yes. The only thing rest is a conflict in our own gang, and we will handle it ourselves.”

An internal conflict? What does that mean?

”But I have the obligation to confirm if the message that I gave is true, confirming if the results avoided innocent people from getting harmed.”

”That isn’t a reason at all. I confirmed the person in the video myself as well.”

”That will be my judgment to make.”

Yondaime looked slightly impatient.

”We’ve already thrown the guy into the second floor vault, and had already beat him up until the extent that you will faint over ten times because of anemia. You aren’t going to ask him to meet you like this, are you?”

”That is why I brought my assistant as well, right? Narumi’s eyesight is the only thing that I trust.” Only my eyesight? I see, but that’s true as well. “I am putting Narumi in charge of judging if the person in the video matches the real person.”

”One stupid excuse after another……”

Yondaime glared at me with a ferocious expression as though he was about to pounce on me, while I could only turn around and pretend not to see it.

In the end, Yondaime still stood up, gesturing with his chin for me to follow. On the other hand, Alice stuffed an IC recorder into my hands while saying something like *’Record the man’s testimony by the way’*. What *”confirming if they match’*? What a bad excuse.

Even so, I wish to learn of the truth that had nearly formed…… And also, the reason that Yondaime is handling this as an internal strife, and must exclude us from this.

Hiro-san remained to keep Alice company, while Yondaime and I

walked to the second floor along with Pole and Rocky.

At the instant when we opened the steel door, a low moan that sounded as though it came from the deepest depths of the throat could be heard.

”Did he spit out any new information?”

Yondaime quickly walked past the wooden floorboards, asking the two people by the door to the storeroom.

”He said that he doesn’t know about their hideout nor the phone number.”

The gang member on the left shrugged. Pole curved his body that was over two meters to enter the storeroom, while Yondaime closely followed. I suddenly remembered the drug dealer who was caught by Hirasaka-gumi during the Angel Fix incident and couldn’t help but gulp. I turned on the power source of the recorder Alice gave me, and the sounds would be sent to the office on the third floor wirelessly, and will be recorded as well.

There was a man tied up with a black plastic bag. I stepped into the room while trembling, and the man finally raised his head.

Though there weren’t any injuries that were particularly visible, I could still see that he was very badly beaten up. The corners of his eyes and lips twisted in pain, while his saliva that was mixed with blood had long dried up by his mouth. Perhaps the attacks were concentrated on the stomach because he wouldn’t be able to speak if they hit his face? I covered my mouth, standing blankly at the entrance of the storeroom in fear.

”…… I’m telling you…… I really don’t know anything……”

The man sounded like he was about to cry.

”The other party called me actively every time, and he doesn’t have a phone as well.”

”Haven’t you met before?” Pole asked in the tone of a delinquent. Lying horizontally on the floor, the man answered while trembling:

”We met a few times at a shop…… A- At Ikebukuro.”

”Sou-san, what should we do? It seems like we wouldn’t know anything even if we hang him up.”

Rocky asked by Yondaime’s ears.

”Do we need to put him into a bag and throw him on a hill?”

”P- Please don’t!”

The tied up man wriggled like a caterpillar, spraying saliva everywhere.

”Sou-san, I- I heard that if I fight with you, you’ll let me go if I win, right? Hirasaka-san said that, isn’t there a rule like that? Please!”

Hirasaka— the word forced itself into my ears, breeding in huge numbers like the spawn of spiders.

Yondaime narrowed his eyes, approaching the man step by step.

”…… Really? So that guy didn’t even forget about such a meaningless thing?”

The wolf answered softly, looking at his opponent frightened out of his wits.

As I was about to interrupt, Yondaime turned around and said while glaring at me:

”Gardening Club kid, get out for a moment, we’re having a judgment. This is very meaningless, so don’t let Alice hear this.”

Hirasaka-gumi’s judgment.

That’s right, Yondaime once told me when we became sworn brothers— about the two men who founded the gang.

As the leaders, they were Hinamura Souichirou who still leaded the juvenile delinquents, and another man— setting up a lot of rules, leaving his name on the signboard of the gang, disappearing

without a trace after that.

Rocky kept silent, pushing me out of the room. I didn't even have the energy to resist. I saw Pole releasing the man and dragging him to the wooden flooboards. After that, the huge body of Rocky blocked my vision, and I was pushed out to the staircase. At the instant before the heavy steel door closed, I heard the sounds made by Yondaime's fists.

Yondaime walked out after about two minutes, glancing at me while wiping away the blood stained on his fingers. After that, he leaned against the railings of the stairs, and heaved a long sigh. Pole and Rocky just stood at the two sides of the steel door.

"Sorry for not telling you before this."

Yondaime spoke to me in a low voice. I blinked.

"…… About what?"

"The guy who stole the T-shirts. Actually, I knew who he is long ago."

Yondaime sat by the railings and extended his hand towards his pocket, taking out a key. '2F Storeroom' was written on its label.

"Another guy has this as well. He was the one who did it…... Just that I never thought that he would actually keep it until now."

Veins appeared on Yondaime's right hand. The label was immediately torn down, and the key was bent by his fingers. Compared with his horrifying grip, the enigmatic expression on Yondaime's face was scarier.

"Sou-san, I still can't believe it, is there some kind of misunderstandi—"

Pole stepped forwards, but was glared to immobility by the ferocious gaze of the wolf.

"This is definitely not a misunderstanding. Having an odd surname like that, how could there be any other person who came back to

Tokyo recently just to look for trouble with us?”

Yondaime turned away after throwing the unusable key onto the floor, the pictures of the rising and descending dragons glaring at me in his stead.

”— Renji was the one who did it.”

1. ↑ A shop that first appeared in the first drama cd of Kamisama no Memochou.
2. ↑ Name of the panda that lived at Ueno.

Chapter 3

That time, Hirasaka Renji was just fifteen, recently graduating from middle school. He did not continue his studies at a high school, but formed a juvenile delinquents' gang known as the 'Shura-dou'. It's hard to imagine that the name was thought of by a city boy, and was said to be taken from a yakuza movie starring Aikawa Shou[1].

"In any case, that guy is super strong, as he's one of the Four Heavenly Kings."

One of the most experienced persons in Hirasaka-gumi— Pole said that to me.

"He might even be scarier than Sou-san. Because he fights with a smile."

"I'm not too familiar with matters that happened during that period of time." Hiro-san answered on the driver's seat.

We were on our way back to Hanamura Ramen from Hirasaka-gumi. As he was too tall, Pole's head bumped onto the top of the vice-driver's seat.

On the other hand, Alice and I sat at the back with a wall of dolls between us while the both of us stayed silent.

"At least Ojiki still went to high school." Pole said.

"Just for a year. And I mixed with Tetsu right after that…… Hirasaka-gumi had already been founded that time."

"The delinquents nearby weren't originally in any gang at all, as they still thought that forming a gang is stupid."

That's true. It's still fine if it's the early Chiba and Kanagawa districts, but such an era is already over. Forming a gang would usually require an imaginary enemy, but the adults don't even have the time to be children's enemies anymore.

”But Hirasaka-san kept saying something like ‘Let’s help the others’, and everyone were like, ‘What are you talking about?’, but the ones who didn’t listen to him would be badly beaten up.”

Pole wasn’t a member of Shura-dou himself, so he was quite displeased with Hirasaka Renji who barged in his territory, but actually he was just a drop out complaining at a convenience store.

And just at that moment, another problematic issue arose from Osaka.

”I heard that Sou-san lived with a woman when he first came to Tokyo.”

”Ehhhhhhhhh!” And he actually lived together with a woman? My previous impressions of him collapsed completely. I wonder how that guy is before his girlfriend. Or perhaps he still had his brows locked constantly?

”Ah, I’ve heard about that a bit……” Hiro-san suddenly interjected. “He depended on women before this as well, and she’s a lady working at a pub or something. As the shop that his girlfriend worked at clashed with Renji’s team, Yondaime dashed over there…… Something like that.”

”Ah, that’s not right. I heard that they didn’t clash!” Pole corrected at a side. “I heard it from Sou-san after that as well. He ran over to the place that Shura-dou gathered and took revenge after that, teaching them a lesson, asking them if they’re idiots, leading so much people and actually daring to make trouble at a shop that had the support of yakuza.”

”Isn’t that just a clash!” Hiro-san couldn’t help but do a tsukkomi on him.

”But Hirasaka-san was quite forgiving. After that, the two of them started to cooperate, chasing away the delinquents from the gang called Godouda or something away, taking charge on the shop themselves.”

How is that possible— If I’m not too familiar with Yondaime, I

would probably have such a reaction. Logically, how would a bunch of kids dare to look for trouble with the yakuza, snatching away part of their territory in the end?

”I heard that Sou-san seemed to have some relations with a house intermediary who did quite a lot of dodgy business. I’m not sure as I’m not really bright, but it seems like they tinkered with the data of land or the building, and took charge of the shop in the end.”

Indeed, tricks like this again. I don’t know how he feels himself, but he really has the potential to be the intelligent-type yakuza.

”And then, he formed a gang with Hirasaka-san. Ever since Sou-san got serious, our territory increased rapidly. The name of the gang changed after that, and we rented an office as well.”

”That’s right, I was always curious about this, but why the name Hirasaka?” Hiro-san inquired.

”Sou-san said something like companies still keep their name after they are merged……”

Wow! That seems to be a very commercialized reason. As expected of Yondaime.

”And also, I heard that Hirasaka-san said that the name Hinamura is fine as well, but Sou-san hates his own surname.”

It is said that Yondaime’s family at Osaka is an old yakuza gang doing business on the road, probably using the name Hinamura-gumi, Hinamura Clan or the like? If so, not wanting to use the word Hinamura is quite understandable.

”However, the sake cup was half filled when they underwent the ritual, so there’s no such thing as one who is on the top. We were present when they underwent the ritual as well, and we felt that we’d probably be unbeatable as long as the two are here. Plus, it seems like Sou-san and Hirasaka-san didn’t only share sake, they exchanged something important as well.”

”…… Something important?” I muttered the words again.

”As for what it is, the both of them won’t tell us at all, so we all say that it’s a ‘super sake ritual’. All of these are legends, you can only say that they’re legends.”

Sake thicker than one’s blood…… And a certain thing even thicker than that that ties the two of them together.

I tried to recall the taste of cola that remained on my lips, and the ritual sake that had already turned faint.

”I heard Renji say something about this as well.”

Hiro-san’s voice was sweet but clouded.

”I asked him what kind of important thing that is, but he said that it’s a formless thing that people can’t see so easily. And Tetsu said in the end: ‘Are you guys gay?’, while Renji said while laughing as well: ‘A relationship closer than bein’ gay.’, making Yondaime extremely annoyed, and they got in a fight, spilling the ramen, causing everyone to be scolded to death by Min-san.”

So such a scene once appeared behind the portiere…… A dream from a long time ago.

”But……” Pole lowered his voice. “The two had already done things to this extent, why did they……?”

In the end, I still couldn’t tell Yondaime this—

Meeting Renji-san at Ueno before this, and the fact that he told me not to get near the livehouse.

Even if it is already certain that he is Yondaime’s past companion, Hirasaka Renji…… No, it should be because it is already certain, I cannot speak it out.

Why did Renji-san— A person who once created Hirasaka-gumi along with Yondaime, do such a thing?

”You guys in the gang, does anyone know the reason Hirasaka Renji left Tokyo?”

Alice kept her chin buried in Mr. Capybara from just now, but suddenly inquired, breaking the silence. I was taken aback, and stared at her face separated by the mocha bear.

”…… No. Nee-san, do you know about it?”

”I do not know right now either. Besides, Hirasaka Renji already left Tokyo when I got to know Yondaime. But I know the way— including which grave I should dig.”

”Sou-san would promptly beat people up when he hears Hirasaka-san’s name, so nobody dares to ask him…… Perhaps— they were already enemies when they parted five years ago?”

”I am not sure about this as well.”

Alice’s words stopped there, and only a dark silence was left after that.

A truth that only the detective can find— However, there is no reason for her to verify, because nobody made such a request.

”Ojiki, so sorry for asking you to send me here.”

Pole immediately bowed deeply after walking out from the car parked before the ramen shop, bumping into the top of the car in the end.

As for why we let him tag along, it was because Pole said that he had something to do at Hanamura Ramen when we was about to leave. At first, he still refused when Hiro-san asked him if he wantsd a lift, but since we have something to ask him along the way as well, we just dragged him into the car. Even so, what business does he have? I thought while looking at the huge silhouette that passed through the portiere.

”It is so hot that I feel like I am going to get cooked.”

Alice frowned while looking at the hot air that entered from the seams of the door. Though the sun was about to set, the asphalt road was emitting large amounts of heat stored before this, causing it to feel much hotter than noon. It seems like the ramen shop

would be packed with people who want to eat ice cream tonight as well. Even the seats formed of overturned beer crates were full of people outside the ramen shop.

”Narumi, help me to order red bean ice cream from Master. And also, though I have no intention to have dinner right now, order cold tsukemen without the ramen if she wishes for me to eat. Hiro, remember to move my good friends back to the office.”

When I walked down the car while holding Alice’s hand, I heard a commotion from the ramen shop. Turning around to have a look, the surprising thing was that Pole actually kneeled down before the portiere. The salarymen customers stood up while holding their bowls, distancing themselves from Pole.

”…… A- Ah, you can’t do this, at a place like this…… I- In any case, can you go to the seats at the back first? I’ll get you an ice cream.”

Ayaka, who was serving the customers outside, seemed to be struggling, showing me a troubled expression, but I was so surprised that I couldn’t move as well.

”What is the meaning of this? There are other customers over here, you’ll trouble the others like this!”

Min-san frowned at the other side of the counter. After that, Pole raised his head.

”Hirasaka-san came back.”

Min-san just moved her face slightly.

”He’s now the gang’s enemy.”

”So what? Who cares about the idiotic fights of you kids?”

”No matter how great Sou-san is, if he goes against Hirasaka-san, who knows how the results will be. And we don’t wish to see them fighting each other as well.”

Min-san stood behind the Chinese frying pan emitting fire and smoke with her head lowered in silence.

”But Sou-san said that this is an internal problem of the gang, and said that he’s not asking for Nee-san and the others’ help. He might have already found out Hirasaka-san’s current location, thinking of ending the past grudges alone. If his opponent is Hirasaka-san, I think that it’s hard for Sou-san to get out without a scratch as well.”

I gulped.

”If it’s Master, you’ll definitely be able to stop Hirasaka-san and Sou-san, so please!”

”Why must I do such a thing? What are you thinking? Idiot!”

Words that sounded extremely cold and cruel. Even I almost felt like adding some words after Pole.

”But Master is stronger than them both, and nobody else can stop them at all.”

”I still have other customers, so stop fussing. And aren’t you a bit mistaken? I’m a ramen shop owner.”

Min-san’s answer was quite justified, and she handed the Chinese fried rice to Ayaka. “Sorry for the wait～” Ayaka served the food outside with a look of fear.

”If Sou or Renji comes to the shop, I’ll treat them to ramen and ice cream as well. If they have anything to say, I’ll listen, but if they continue to do these useless matters, I’ll beat them up— this probably counts as my job. However……”

Min-san finally turned her gaze to Pole— or I should say, Alice and I, Hiro-san on the driver’s seat, Yondaime at a faraway place separated by the railways and the station, or perhaps Renji-san somewhere in Tokyo? That moment, Min-san’s gaze was soft like candy made of white snow.

”Isn’t bringing them here your job?”

Pole’s hands fell onto the asphalt road with a thud. Alice looked at the large, downcast silhouette.

”Let’s go, we have our work to do.”

Alice pulled on my sleeve, and we walked towards the back of the ramen shop. Alice stood while holding the tray to her chest, looking at us with a confused gaze. However, Ayaka was much stronger than me, and she walked to Pole’s side with her head lowered.

”E- Erm…… Do you want to order anything? I’ll get another beer crate for you to sit on.”

As Alice forcedly pulled on me to go forward, that was all I heard. The two of us walked silently on the emergency backstairs, letting the lights, steamy air, sounds of conversation and the fragrance of soup fade gradually.

Such a kind place was here from the past until now, so there should have been a place for Renji-san here once before as well.

And he actually had to abandon such a place— What in the world happened?

Alice stepped into the office that had the air-conditioner going strong, causing goosebumps to rise at once, and immediately collapsed on her bed. Since she went out for so long, perhaps she already reached her limits?

After the process of moving the dolls was complete, Alice just turned around to look at Hiro-san.

”It is fine now. Please tell Master for me: Very sorry for troubling her.”

Hiro-san, who seemed to be convinced, nodded in response, and returned to the entrance after placing the dolls by the bed.

”I’ll go to Yondaime’s again for a spin.”

Hiro-san turned again.

”I’ll reaffirm if he’s truly not going to give the detective a request. Yondaime’s mind is full of the hereditary genes of the yakuza, so it’s easy for him to think of useless matters like the gang’s pride and the

like. Actually, he's already busy with his job, so let us NEETs handle the troublesome matters."

"As you wish."

Alice's answer was unexpectedly cold. My thoughts were the same as Hiro-san's, thinking that Alice should be like this as well.

"Ahh— Blast! That Tetsu, not knowing where he ran off to at these times! It should be his turn to appear."

If Tetsu-senpai is here, even if he goes to beat Yondaime up— No, that would probably make matters more serious. But in incidents of violence like this, his absence is quite troubling.

"Alice, don't force yourself as well."

Hiro-san reminded her while putting on his shoes.

"I have never forced myself in my whole life."

Alice raised her body by supporting her hands on the bed, answering softly.

It seems like letting her calm down would be better. As I was about to follow Hiro-san out of the room, a shrill voice came from behind.

"Why are even you going out? Come and kneel over here."

Alice was buried in a pile of dolls while being covered in a blanket. As her eyes were somewhat foggy, I could only do as she said, kneeling down by the bed.

Alice pressed the doll of Mr. Capybara that I bought for her before her chest, hiding half of her face, making me feel that her gaze was even sharper, strongly fixing me there like a nail made of ice.

"The job that I accepted from Yondaime was only to make the wanted fliers of the T-shirt thefts."

Alice looked at me with a gaze as though she was typing with only her thumb.

”The task has already been completely. The man who was caught was confirmed by you as well, confirmed to be in the criminal organization. The current me is only one of the eyes drifting in the vast sea of information, without power or a will, so I have no obligation to answer your questions. But I still have to ask: ‘What do you know?’”

I suddenly felt a sense of weakness, almost collapsing on the floor. I tried to support myself with my palms, trying not to fall, but I really couldn’t meet Alice’s gaze. Though the air-conditioner was going strong, my neck felt really hot.

”Perhaps you did not realize yourself, but you are among the few who can look into Hinamura Souichirou’s eyes directly, but you did not dare to look at him directly today. What happened at Ueno? What are you concealing?”

That moment, words flashed past my mind. I thought, how nice it would be if I could cry or fly into a temper right now? However, I could not find a reason to do so.

Because I lack the courage, I did not speak.

”To know is to die.”

Alice’s words pierced into my heart, while I could only raise my head after her words.

”That part of you has long died, and nobody can heal it, but I am a NEET detective, a messenger of the deceased. If you wish to share death, I can do it.”

In my trembling lips, my frozen words gradually thawed.

I should have learnt a lot of lessons already. Not saying anything—that is a matter that hurts the people around us the most, and even I was once one of the victims. However, I still had to be reminded by Alice till this extent, or I would only continue to cower in my own small world.

”…… I met…… Hirasaka Renji.”

I spoke those words after some effort, and tightly bit my lip.

Alice just placed her doll on her knee. The blackness that lingered in her eyes— I think that is a color that anyone who once looked at the sky alone in a silent night saw it before.

Thus, I told her about all that had occurred, including the fact that I met Renji-san at the location where I headed to on Yondaime's request. Which means, those were not coincidences at all. It is certain that Renji-san and I will meet, and we did indeed meet twice.

Being close friends in the past— Renji-san told me, he returned to Tokyo just to beat up his previous sworn brother to pieces. When he said that, it was like his eyes were sucking all shadows in it.

"…… I don't know what he is planning to do, but……"

That person— seems very sad.

Having to play the fool or beating people up, if he doesn't do one of those two, he probably can't continue to breathe— that was what his expression said.

Even after I spoke of what I knew, Alice still maintained the silence for quite some time. The doll that I bought her was clamped between her knees, thus being flattened and changing shape. Her gaze contained neither reproach nor lament—

It was just understanding.

"Dr. Pepper……"

After a long, cold silence, Alice finally spoke.

"…… Get one for me."

I took out a red can so cold that it almost stuck onto my fingers from the fridge, and after handing it to Alice, she did something that she never once did to me before.

After taking a sip, she passed the can to me.

”You drink it as well, all of the rest.”

I was troubled, breathless and couldn’t speak. After drinking a small sip of the beverage, its taste mixed with the taste of the cola that I shared with Renji-san in my memory.

As I slowly drank in small sips, the bubbles had long dispersed when the can became light. Thus, I drank the remaining in one go, and felt the taste of sweetness and spice trickling down the interior

of my throat.

I stood up while holding the can, feeling as though Alice's blood was silently absorbed into my body from my gut, and couldn't look into her eyes at all.

"I'm sorry…… And thank you."

"The one that you should apologize to should not be me, should it?"

"That's true."

"No matter, I do not wish for my assistant to keep being so useless as well. Treating this like I am training a dog, even if I have to do it a hundred or a thousand times, I will still teach you the same thing."

"I will try my best."

"No matter how hard I try to take root, grow buds and spread the tender leaves of words, the real world that I can come in contact with is still limited, after all."

That moment, a trace of moistness finally surfaced in Alice's eyes.

"And you are a part of that limited world."

I nodded.

If we cannot express things in word, we can only wait for our world to wither away in those small palms.

They must be expressed in words.

After I walked out of the detective agency, and was walking on the dark emergency backstairs, it was coincidentally the closing time of Hanamaru Ramen. Min-san took off her tanktop, her upper body wrapped only with a white sarashi, and was washing a large pot, while Ayaka who had long removed her apron was scrubbing the floor in the kitchen.

That's right, I wonder what happened to Pole after that. He didn't use violence or cry while begging, did he?

"He ate five bowls of ramen and went back on Hiro's car."

"Is that so…… That's fine."

Having a healthy appetite is a proof of health, I suppose? While thinking of that, I suddenly realized that I was quite hungry as well. Unfortunately, drinking a can of Dr. Pepper cannot sate my hunger at all. The shop already closed for the day? I originally wanted to go back after eating a bowl of ramen. I looked at the large pot that was still smoking while touching my stomach. Perhaps my expression that time was somewhat sorrowful, as Min-san spoke after she noticed it.

"Huh, so you're hungry?"

"Err…… That's right….. Lately, my sister keeps coming back rather late, so there isn't any dinner."

"That's fine. Why don't you take this back?"

Min-san tossed a food container with three soy eggs in it to me.

"Err….. Thank you."

"Don't you give it to your sister! You eat them all up."

"Expired food again! I'm very sorry, but I'm not a rubbish bin!"

"At least rubbish bins can still be used to pickle vegetables or let children play hide-and-seek in."

"Min-san, aren't you treating me especially cold these days?"

"It's late now, hurry up and send Ayaka back properly!"

She actually didn't even listen!

As I was squatting down on the asphalt road before the ramen shop in frustration, chewing on the extremely salty soy eggs, Ayaka

walked out as she finished cleaning up. “Min-san, good night—!”

”Be careful! See you tomorrow!” Min-san waved behind the portiere.

”It’s fine even if you don’t wait for me!”

Looking rather happy, Ayaka pranced around me while walking.

”Well, I’m going to the station anyway.”

”But this is the first time you sent me there!”

No, there should be five or six more times now. Before the winter break, I was always free, and Ayaka—

”Ah, s- sorry, perhaps this isn’t the first time you sent me?”

Ayaka opened her arms and blocked me.

”Ah, no. Actually, I’m much more considerate that you think, Ayaka.”

”N- Nobody said that Fujishima-kun isn’t considerate or doesn’t work or does work sloppily……”

”I never said that as well.”

Ayaka laughed while escaping about five steps in front of me, turned around and said while walking backwards:

”Is that so…… So this isn’t the first time, then…… I’m even happier!”

Her words did indeed make me happy, but I still couldn’t accept it. Though Ayaka’s face was somewhat dim below the streetlights at night, she was unbearably dazzling to me, causing me to be unable to look at her directly.

Ayaka lost a lot of things in the incident that happened last winter, including the memories when we first met. Even so, she still returned to Hanamaru Ramen, returning to my side.

The Ayaka right now can already face the matters that had turned into nothingness with a smile, but if it were to be me, I probably couldn't do it. That was why I felt that she was dazzling.

"But…… It's fine that you're okay, because you looked terrible when you returned to the ramen shop just now, Fujishima-kun."

"R- Really?"

It seems like I'm really easily read. This is not a good situation.

"But you looked much better after returning from Alice's place."

"Mnn……"

So sorry, I'm a simple man.

"If it were to be me, I probably can't do it. I don't know what I have to do for Fujishima-kun to be willing to confide so many things in me. So Alice is really great!"

"Erm…… Well……"

Can you please not speak as though I'm a troublesome rare beast?

"I'm just a student working part time at a ramen shop, so I don't understand things that are too hard. That can't be helped as well."

"It's not much, Alice didn't do anything special as well. She just treated me to a can of Dr. Pepper. After taking a sip, she gave the rest to me. To be honest, it doesn't really taste good and felt sorrowful, but well, it's like I just calmed down."

"Ehhhhh—!?"

Ayaka suddenly made a pose of surrender, looking extremely taken aback. Her way of expressing her shock was still the same as the time before she lost her memories.

"You were forced to drink it all? The one that Alice took a sip out of?"

”Eh? Mnn, that’s right.”

”T- T- That! Tha- That won’t do! Fujishima-kun, what were you thinking!”

Ayaka suddenly approached, frantically hitting my arm. What the heck? What happened?

”Please take out your phone and call Alice!”

Ayaka’s expression scared me, so I hurriedly called Alice as she instructed me to. As soon as the call went through, the phone was immediately snatched away by her.

”Is it Alice? It’s me, Ayaka! I heard from Fujishima-kun about the matter that you lethim drink Dr. Pepper!”

Ayaka started to lecture her through the phone:

”Listen closely, even if it’s indirect, things that can’t be done just can’t! Don’t you realize that Fujishima-kun touched the can that you drank from with his mouth? Think about it in detail what that means!”

I finally understood the topic that they were talking about and fell into a daze. Ayaka pressed my cellphone on my ear in anger.

’Narumi! You- You shameless fool!’

Again? If you didn’t notice from the start, why don’t you just be ignorant about this forever!

After I was scolded by Alice with tons of incomprehensible words, Ayaka finally hung up for me and stuffed the phone into my pocket.

”Fujishima-kun, please take more notice of these things as well!”

”Okay, fine….. But is this really a matter that you have to mind so much? Like Tetsu-senpai and Major, they steal my ramen from a side when they don’t have money on them as well!”

”But Alice is a girl!”

On the course of being scolded, we unknowingly arrived at the station. Coincidentally, a bus was flashing its blinding backlights as well, and was about to stop by the road. Though Ayaka seemed to have something more to say, she just sprinted towards the station after a goodbye in the end. The large, dusty bus sprayed out exhaust gas on my face, and it gradually left while going along the river.

Today was a long day. The me right now shouldn't actually be a character who lives in the dreams of the capybaras at the Ueno zoo, right? And perhaps I was about to be eaten by the tapirs as well. While imagining idiotic matters, I walked towards the dark streets with my back to the rivers.

It was already past midnight when I finally returned home. Though it was the last attack of the day— as soon as I walked into the entrance, I was given a punch by my sister.

"Though nobody cares how long you don't go home or which street you die of starvation on, you should at least handle the clothes that you wash. How long did you hang them there for? And also, remember to clean up the house!"

While rubbing on the bruise on my head, I walked to my bedroom on the second floor. The bed was piled up with underwear with square pegs sill on them, shirts, towels and other garments. When I saw the scene, lethargy because of overwork for the day (probably) caused my brain that was in denial to spread to my eyelids, neck, shoulders, arms, abdomen, thighs, calves and other locations, making me collapse directly into the hill of clothes. I can't go on. Though I haven't bathed or brushed my teeth, and was quite hungry as well…… Good night, I'm going to sleep.

However, the touch of protruding threads on my face caused my nearly closed eyes to open once more.

It was a white T-shirt. Only the collar and the sleeves were black, while the shoulder and abdomen part were spread with colorful, radial embroidery. It was the shirt that Renji-san wore that time.

Ah, I brought it back for washing.

I pushed the other clothing away, lying down on my bed and spread the T-shirt open under the lights. I remember that he said that this is a very important shirt, so I must return it to him. But how can I meet that person again? Besides, I don't even know if he would contact me again. Since Renji-san kept investigating Yondaime, learning of our relationship is only a matter of time.

Knowing that I am a person helping Hirasaka-gumi.

Him and I— are actually enemies.

After some thought, I realized that this was the point that I was so worried of— I do not wish to go against that person. This is different from the time when I fought Tetsu-senpai, because it's obvious that Renji-san is deliberately making trouble. Because of that, it made me feel even sadder.

But the saddest person would probably be—

As I was about to throw the T-shirt aside, I suddenly saw something with the corner of my eye. On a triangular hanger not far from me, there was a black T-shirt. Hirasaka-gumi's uniform.

"Ahh……"

I sprang upwards, taking the black and white shirts, spreading them open.

The swallowtail butterfly emblem printed in front of the black T-shirt and the embroidery on Renji-san's shirt— after the two overlapped, I finally realized it. This isn't a radial embroidery at all, but is actually a part of the swallowtail butterfly emblem. Perhaps this is an incomplete work? As a lot of colored threads must be used, such a mystifying state that looks like fireworks would be presented if the product hasn't been finished yet.

This shirt is important— I remember that Renji-san once said that.

He was probably referring to this, right? The 'thing most important to each other' that Yondaime and Renji-san exchanged. Because

Yondaime's tailoring skills are great, he made this himself…… But that doesn't seem right. According to Hiro-san it is something formless that people can't see so easily.

How confusing. I placed the two shirts on my knee and lied down again.

'I thought that no matter how long I live, I probably won't be able to have a more important friend than that guy.'

The words that Renji-san said and the taste of the cola that we drank kept swirling in my mind.

If that's true—

The person who is the saddest should be Yondaime, right?

Because he hid the matter of the storeroom key for quite some time as well. I think he is a calm person who would think carefully of all possibilities before taking an appropriate action, and might even be a more suitable candidate to be a detective than me. But such a person actually……

Perhaps he did not wish to believe such a truth? I hope that's so.

If so, what should I do then?

I already reached my limits when I thought about that. The lethargy frozen in my body started to thaw, assaulting my eyelids like an avalanche caused when spring arrives. I slept so well that I didn't even dream.

After noon next day, the weather gradually turned bad, and the wind started to strengthen as well. It felt like there would be a thunderstorm after noon. Because of that, I placed the T-shirt that Renji-san asked me to keep into two layers of plastic bags and kept it in my backpack, walking outside after that. Just updating the promotional website of the band and the blog took me the whole morning, so it wasn't too long until the appointed time for a meeting.

Yondaime stayed at the innermost room of the Hirasaka-gumi office — a storeroom having beds, not-too-tall moveable bookshelves, desks, chairs and other articles kept messily in the room. He was typing on the keyboard while talking on the phone. Before this, Yondaime was clueless about the usage of computers, but after I gave him some lessons, he improved so much that he could handle the computer of his own gang. That was why the time he stayed in the room increased quite a lot recently, allowing us to meet alone. That would be a great opportunity.

”Aren’t you going to a CD firm four in the afternoon? You’re going with the designer, right? Don’t come here if you don’t have any business to do with me.”

After hanging up, Yondaime continued to type with his eyes glued to the monitor. Grasping even my own schedule, he’s such a scary person.

”I have some business with you!”

”If it’s about Renji, I don’t want to listen. Hiro came over here and made a huge fuss yesterday, so you’re probably lectured by Alice as well, right? This is none of your busine—“

”I met Renji-san.”

While I was thinking that Yondaime’s seat turned around, I was grabbed on the collar the next instant and was flung to the wall. The eyes of a wolf blazing with strong flames of fury appeared before me.

”When? Where?”

”…… Very…… Sorry…… For not telling you this, but……”

”I’m asking you when and where you met him!”

”About Renji-san…… Yondaime probably didn’t request anything to Alice, right? So I don’t have any reason to tell you about this.”

Vigorous pain caused my vision to blur, and my legs were already touching air. Yondaime lifted me, causing the back of my head to

hit the wall behind.

”Enough with the chatter! Speak!”

”Then please…… Request…… Al- ice……” My voice was disconnected. “We are detectives, and we exist just for these times.”

Yondaime flung me to the bed.

”Stop the fuss! How can I allow a matter of my kin to spread like this!”

”Aren’t I one of your kin as well!”

I unconsciously raised my voice in answer, causing my hurt throat to ache and then cough vigorously.

”So you can’t say anything to me? Aren’t you and Renji-san companions? I heard that even the sake that you shared was equal, but what happened after that? Did you really break off all relations with him?”

”That’s right, it happened long ago. We aren’t brothers anymore.”

”Why!?”

”Because of a failure to keep promises, it’s the same for the both of us. That’s why Renji couldn’t stay in the gang anymore, that’s all. If he’s still hating me until now, that’s fine, I’ll just kill him!”

”Renji-san—“

Hates him? He still hates Yondaime right now?

I don’t understand. I don’t even know what happened, so how could I understand how much sorrow was engraved in the eyes hidden below the goggles-styled sunglasses?

However, when I spread out the item covered in a plastic from my backpack, it was like cracks appeared on Yondaime’s face.

”You probably know this T-shirt, right? Renji-san forgot to take it

away. We just met each other in coincidence, so I almost didn't ask him anything, but…… But that person said that this shirt is very important, and that I must return it to him."

Yondaime heaved a large sigh and leaned on the back of the seat, while I crossed the bed to sit by Yondaime.

"I heard that you exchanged things important to each other, right? Was this shirt sewn by you?"

"Who did you hear this from?"

Pole once said that this had almost turned into a legend now, while Hiro-san knows it as well.

Yondaime threw his cellphone to the bed and spat out: "Useless."

"It's not something that is visible at all. It's something done just for looks, and Renji should have forgotten it long ago."

So the T-shirt is indeed not it? But I still continued.

"But wasn't this sewn by Yondaime? It's the emblem of the gang!"

"It was not me."

Is it possible that he just doesn't want to admit it? However, Yondaime pointed at the abdomen and shoulders part of the T-shirt in my hands and said:

"Look closely. The pattern on the side abdomen is 1.3 times larger than the part of the shoulders, and so that the tone of the colors would look the same, the arrangement of the embroidery has some changes, and it's formed by uploading the pattern of the embroidery into a computer and enlarging it. How could I do such a thing?"

I looked at the unfinished emblem in a daze, and looked at Yondaime's face after that.

Yondaime was right. To Yondaime, who did not know how to use a computer before I taught him to, it's impossible for him to do such an embroidery. However—

Yondaime indeed knows about the embroidery on the T-shirt.

”The person who sewn this was a woman called Hison.”

Yondaime turned his face away.

…… A woman? And Hison…... Is she a Korean? She’s…… the person living together with Yondaime, his girlfriend?

”This woman isn’t here anymore. I couldn’t protect her, and Renji couldn’t do that as well. That’s all.”

When Yondaime stopped talking, I couldn’t continue my questions as well. It’s the same for the questions about Renji-san and that woman. After that, there was a soft silence, as though the floorboards in the room were layered with chilly mercury.

”Can you contact Renji?”

I didn’t realize that it was a question directed at me for a moment.

”…… Eh? Ah…… Well……”

If I shake my head right now, it seems like even my bones would be bitten to pieces by him.

”He doesn’t have a phone, but I told him my number before this.”

”Tell me if he calls. I want to kill him.”

I couldn’t help but gulp, but I truly shook my head in refusal.

”No.”

Yondaime glared at me with his mouth closed.

”Renji-san…… is a friend that I met coincidentally at Harajuku and reunited at Ueno, that’s all. To me……”

”Stop your blabbering. Don’t you know that he’s going against us?”

”I will reconfirm this with Renji-san myself. I still don’t wish to believe this.”

”You just met him twice, so what do you know?”

”Didn’t you refuse to believe this at first as well, Yondaime? That was why you hid the matter of the storeroom key.”

After I finished speaking, my vision immediately shook vigorously. An impact caused hot air to be spat out from my mouth, my body was bent into half, and I finally felt the vigorous pain on my abdomen that moment. Yondaime’s iron punch had landed on my stomach, making me feel nauseous, and could only suppress the pain while trembling with one hand on the bed.

”You just need to do your own job. Tell Alice and Hiro about this as well!”

After that, Yondaime walked out of the room. The room was filled with a powdered darkness and solemnity, but I lied down on the bed, unable to move for quite some time.

I searched for the T-shirt that I kept for Renji-san.

My job—

Pretending that I cannot see a dark world like this, only looking at the silhouette of the band that is about to step into the spotlight, and then awaiting Yondaime to break Renji-san— Or Renji-san to break Yondaime to a state impossible to save, and only wait. Is this really my job?

I definitely won’t stand for such a thing!

”So this is the building of Sou-san’s office? That’s cool!”

Mika-san looked at the signboard of Hirasaka Office hung on the building, crying out in excitement. She was the young female event planner. She wore a tight fitting shirt and a miniskirt, making me regret a lot that I asked to meet her before the office. But Mika-san did wish to see what kind of place Hirasaka-gumi is, so it couldn’t be helped. After all, the CD firm that we were going to was quite near, so meeting here was quite convenient as well.

”And we have bodyguards as well! Fujishima-san, you’re really awesome! You’re giving off the presence of a bigshot!”

”Not really, this is…… Well……” I turned around in a headache.

”Yes sir! We will protect Aniki and the client!” “We shall now hone our manly aura!”

They were the number one in height, Pole, and the number one in width, Rocky, from Hirasaka-gumi. If the two take action at the same time, they might be able to block even nuclear bombs, but they were extremely visible. Added with the fact that they were forbidden to wear their black T-shirt uniform, the two of them wore idiotic clothes with ‘Courage’ ‘Chivalry’ and the like on it. How can I bring these kind of people out to the streets? However, the two said that it was an order from their leader, completely refusing to leave. Yondaime thought that I might already be treated as one of the accomplices helping Hirasaka-gumi by Renji-san and the others, so going out might be dangerous. Treating me so coldly before this but doing this right now, I really don’t know what he’s thinking of.

In any case, he’s just too much of a busybody— And there isn’t just me today as well.

”Erm…… We’re visiting companies and shops today. They’ll be scared, so please don’t follow us.”

”We’ll definitely do our job as a bodyguard properly!” “We’ll definitely glare at them until they don’t dare to say even one word!”

I didn’t even want to answer them. When we visited Tower Records, I took the chance to slip away with Mika-san, successfully throwing Pole and Rocky off our track.

”Aniki! Where are you, Aniki!” “Idiot, calm down. Hurry up and ask the shopkeepers!”

”W- What’s the matter? What are you looking for?”

”Fujishima, Fujishima Narumi! What? Type? What type?”

”Aniki should be, erm…… the same type as Takeuchi Riki-san and

Aikawa Shou-san!”

”…… I- Is that so? Then he might be in the drama, songs, or movie soundtrack department……”

”Okay, let’s go to the drama department!” “Aniki isn’t here!” “You guys, actually lying to us!”

The people at Tower, so sorry. We hurriedly dashed into a door with ‘Staff Only’ writted on it, and could finally greet the person in charge of indie bands peacefully. And of course, we escaped from the scene from the back door after our discussion ended as well. Judging from the two’s brains, thinking of a solution like calling us directly would probably take half a day.

”Is it really fine leaving the bodyguards there?”

Instead of saying that she was worried, Mika-san looked more disappointed instead. Is bringing hooligans around really so fun?

”It’s okay, the people in the gang are just too worried. I’m just a high schooler working part time.”

”But Fujishima-san is indeed talented, so it’s really too much of a pity for you to be a student working part time. To be honest, are you interested in jobs like this after you graduate?”

When Mika-san said that, we were just passing by a crowded station, making me stare at her as I thought I heard wrong.

”We’re going to the company making merchandise, and they’re interested in the T-shirts with the band logo on it as well. The black thrush can be sold as a cartoon character as well…… And then, some blogs are really interested as well.”

”Isn’t that just fine? I just wrote all of the things that happened on it.”

”But for example, the capybara article, all of the workers in our company laughed so much about it! I thought that it was content completely unrelated to the band, making me worry while laughing, but it actually had some connections in the end, giving me a huge

shock!”

It’s an official blog informing the others of the event news after all……

”You’re probably suited for writing essays, huh?”

”Huh? Erm……”

…… Aren’t I more suited for becoming a salaryman? That was just a conclusion in comparism, but I never thought of such a thing before— never thinking that I might have other choices other than becoming a NEET.

”I can understand the gang worrying for you. If anything happens to Fujishima-san, they’ll be very troubled.”

”Not really, they just like to play yakuza games. I’m not a bigshot that needs bodyguards to protect me.”

However, my opinion seemed to be wrong. I should have trusted Yondaime’s intuition instead.

After passing the Shinjuku south exit, the pedestrians on the street decreased visibly. I heard that the company making merchandise made merchandise of characters of game companies as well, and its structure was quite large. I never thought that it would be near the neighboring Hachimanjuu[2], a peaceful area unlike commercial districts.

We turned left at Meiji Street, and was passing by Wins, a horse betting company. As it was a normal day, it was rather dark and empty, without any other pedestrians there except for us. Even so, I didn’t notice the gradually approaching footsteps as I was thinking of what Mika-san said.

All of a sudden, silhouettes appeared at both of our sides, and started to chase us. I stopped because of a bad feeling and pulled on the string of Mika-san’s handbag.

”Eh? What—“

As Mika-san was turning around, I felt a huge impact on my abdomen. I nearly fell down, but my shoulders were forcibly grabbed and pulled up. What came into my view was a black uniform with a white swallowtail butterfly emblem printed on it, frizzy long hair bleached blonde with the black visible that looked like pudding, a muddy gaze and noserings. The person who seemed to be a delinquent wore a nauseating smile, and caught hold of my shirt, adding a kick on my abdomen with his kneecap.

”— Ugh!”

As my body bent in pain, my back was assaulted with a follow-up attack that seemed to have been from an elbow, and I could only squat down on the road. I was about to guard with my arms, but was kicked by my opponent on my side abdomen through the cracks, making me feel that my gastric juices were about to spill out.

”S- Stop that! What are you doing!”

I suddenly heard Mika-san’s wails, and tried to stand up. My arms seemed to be bleeding because they scratched the asphalt road. In my vision that blurred because of pain, I saw a handbag and high heeled shoes flying away, while Mika-san’s small body could not be seen as she was pressed down by two men in black shirts. I only understood on that moment that there were actually three assaulters.

”Y- You guys! Let go!”

I shouted with blood mixed in my saliva while preparing to grab the man from his back, but was kicked on my head, and I collapsed into a garden by the road. Only swallowtail butterfly emblems came into my view— it’s them, the ones who stole the uniforms and made trouble everywhere— Renji-san’s—

I struggled to crawl out from the garden but my neck was immediately grabbed and I was pressed on the scorching road. On the other side of my view, I saw Mika-san frantically flailing her hands with her mouth covered. It looked like she was hurt somewhere, as the blood flowing to her neck stained her shirt red.

”What now? Should we break a few bones first?”

”Aren’t these two in charge of promotion? Shouldn’t we make them unable to talk?”

”What should we do if we kill them accidentally? Hirasaka-san didn’t tell us to do things till this extent.”

”Then let’s just hospitalize them for two months.”

The black shirted men spoke chilling words while wearing ominous smiles. While feeling that the heat in my body seemed to be flowing out from my body along with the blood on my hand, I understood one thing.

They came for Mika-san and I— Which means, we were followed, and might already be targeted from the moment we walked out from the Hirasaka-gumi office. Yondaime’s worries were accurate. I underestimated our enemies too much, and that was how I ended up like. I was forced to stand after my hand was twisted to my back, the joints of my shoulders screeching. As I was about to call out for help, the tip of a shoe flew towards my mouth once again, while the taste of blood covered my cry. The sounds of Mika-san’s sobbing pierced into my ears. What am I doing? Go! Struggle! Must I keep getting beaten up like this!? Severe pain surged from my scapula to the top of my head, crushing my resolution. Once again, I collapsed on the road stained red because of my blood, while the ringing noise of my bones seemed to have came into my ears through my muscles.

All of a sudden, the weight restraining me disappeared.

The ground shook. A shadow flew and fell by my side. It was one of the nasty men in black T-shirts— he lied there with the whites of his eyes showing.

I looked upwards in surprise, and half of my vision blocked by blood was carved open by the strong sunlight. The silhouette of a large person blocked the sunlight, standing between Mika-san and I.

”You guys, what are you doing in front of the holy Wins?”

Strong muscles caused the back of the shirt to appear tight, while his arms were thick and sturdy like wires used in lifts. Horse magazines and pachinko magazines were stuffed in the back pocket of the creased jeans.

”Oi, Narumi. I don’t think I saw these guys before, are they new members?”

”Tetsu…… Senpai!?”

I made an odd cry. The face that turned around to look at me was indeed Tetsu-senpai’s.

”Why are you fighting with the men in Hirasaka-gumi at a place like this in broad daylight? Is it because of that? Being unpopular with girls, so you guys are letting it out on Narumi—“

The man on the right who was holding Mika-san twisted her hand to an unnatural direction in tension, while Mika-san, whose mouth was covered, twisted her face because of the severe pain and moaned. That moment, Tetsu-senpai’s fists lashed out, hitting the man’s face accurately with a clear, chilling sound, while the man collapsed on the ground with blood spurting out, releasing his hand grabbing Mika-san as well. On the next instant, the man on the left was punched on the neck and collapsed on the asphalt road as well.

”What the heck! Oi, miss, are you okay? Oi, Narumi, you’re really badly beaten up! Hey, don’t sleep! This lady is bleeding as well, hey! My phone number was cut as I don’t have any money right now, so hurry up and let me borrow your phone. Do we need an ambulance?”

Tetsu-senpai’s slightly rough voice was especially pleasing to the ears that moment, and I never felt that before or after that. Senpai called people after fishing out my phone from my pocket, and almost directly hauled Mika-san and I towards the direction of the station.

” Niigata Horse Racing Alley is overwhelmingly beautiful. Well, the

grassy lanes seemed to keep extending and extending towards the blue skies! And there wasn't much of an audience, so it was quite cool. As it was too comfortable, I slept in a sleeping bag for ten days or so in front of their entrance."

"Tetsu, it seems like you're already prepared to step into the ranks of vagrants."

Hiro-san smiled wryly.

"If I lost the last bet yesterday, then I really had to walk back to Tokyo."

"Why don't you just live directly in Niigata?"

"I'll freeze to death in winter."

As for me— I shivered while sitting down on a hard chair, staring at the door of the treatment room, not in the mood to chatter along with them at all.

As Mika-san was so hurt that she couldn't walk, Tetsu-senpai asked Hiro-san to fetch us, sending Mika-san to the hospital nearest to us after that, which would be the large hospital that Ayaka lived in before this. My injuries weren't too serious, but Mika-san's treatment hasn't ended yet. Being bathed in the smell of disinfectants all around us, I felt a pain as though my whole body was flattened.

"Well…… I was already used to sleeping on a pile of horse betting coupons. When I went back to Tokyo, I was unconsciously attracted nearby Wins again, and in the end, I noticed Narumi with an unfamiliar woman being beaten half to death by people in the gang. Tell me, how can you do a tsukkomi on him in such a situation?"

"Narumi-kun, it's fortunate that your luck is good……"

Hiro-san said in a sighing tone and looked at me.

That's right, it was just good luck. If Tetsu-senpai wasn't there that time— How would the situation turn out? I tightly held my arm bandaged because of my injuries.

I was too naive. Saying something prideful like *'I count as a person in the gang as well'* to Yondaime, I actually dared to think that I wouldn't get involved in acts of violence?

"Then what now? Why didn't you contact Yondaime? Isn't this a dispute in the gang?"

"Ahhh…… Well….." Hiro-san winked at me. As Tetsu-senpai was completely clueless about the situation, he thought that the men in black shirts were members of Hirasaka-gumi.

I really didn't want to explain, and informing Yondaime of such an incident made me feel downcast as well.

However, both of them were still my jobs.

I told Tetsu-senpai about the ins and outs of the matter, and it was already twilight when the three of us walked out of the hospital. On the way to the parking lot, we did not say even one word. Hiro-san's expression was quite heavy as well, as it was the first time I told him the fact that I actually met Renji-san some time ago.

Hiro-san finally spoke when we were in a traffic jam while passing through Meiji Street.

"I'm going to the hospital tomorrow as well. What about you, Narumi-kun?"

Sitting by the driver's seat, I looked at the band-aids and bandages covering my hand and shook my head.

Just to be safe, Mika-san had to stay in the hospital for one day for further observation, as it seemed like she had symptoms of internal hemorrhage. The one who listened to the doctor's report was Hiro-san, so I wasn't too sure about the details. As it would complicate matters if I, as a high school student, appear, I just stayed at the waiting area like a turtle.

I really don't know how I am going to face Mika-san now.

I heard Tetsu-senpai heave a long sigh on the back seat.

”It seems like things are turning out to be quite troublesome! Speaking of which, why didn’t Yondaime ask for my help? If he just told me about this, I’d have dashed back here immediately.”

”I gave you quite a few calls! Running off to a faraway place like Niigata, and your phone number was cut as well!”

Hiro-san repeatedly pounded on the steering wheel.

”Well, that’s true. Ahahaha…… Hiro, why did you do a tsukkomi on me! Isn’t that Narumi’s job……? Oi, Narumi, what’s wrong with you? You don’t look too good. Is your head hurt as well?”

”…… How can I still look good……?”

Even I felt unmotivated when I heard the weak voice that I spoke with.

”Why does this guy look so dejected?”

”Probably because a girl saw him looking weak?”

Of course not! However…… That might have a slight truth in it.

”I just feel like…… I’m just all talk and no action.”

”You’re talking about this only now? Narumi doesn’t have any strong points other than his talk, everyone knows about that!”

”Hey, Tetsu, don’t speak of things so plainly! Narumi-kun is about to cry now.”

Hiro-san, you’re cruel as well! I hugged my knees on the seat.

Hiro-san suggested to pass the message to Yondaime in my stead, but I shook my head in refusal. Tetsu-senpai is right. If I don’t even dare to speak out loud, I’d really become a useless person. I must do this myself. But what to do after that?

”Narumi-kun, are you still going on with the job? I suggest that it’s better for you to stop.”

I shook my head in response, but actually, I know that it's just a useless show of strength.

"…… Hmm, is that so? Then I won't say anything more. After all, it's Narumi-kun's own decision."

I thought to myself, what did I decide?

When I used my hands to cover my face, the injuries on my neck and my hands started to ache faintly.

Those people took action because of Renji-san's orders. The fact stuck in the depths of my throat.

Up till yesterday, I kept wishing to convince Yondaime to request Alice to handle the case. Now that the time for the concert is approaching, it is a very important time to Yondaime, and I think that he doesn't have the time to handle such troublesome matters as well. If he acts recklessly, his credibility will be doubted as well.

But if he hands the case to the detective— Not only Alice, even Tetsu-senpai, Hiro-san and Major could help. The problem is, the stubborn NEETs could only pretend that nothing happened before that. Actually, it was a matter of personal pride as well, as the small, comfortable world that is direct, and does not ask the others of their privacy has a delicate balance, so that's why it turned out like this.

But even if Yondaime hands the case to Alice right now, so what? If Renji-san isn't caught, the case cannot be closed. But if it's for a result like this— Can I still continue the job as an assistant detective?

You just met twice, what do you know? Yondaime's voice resounded by my ears again. That's right. That person is just an enemy— how nice if I could just think like that?

The disputes in my head did not have any trace of loosening, and I heard Tetsu-senpai's mumblings that moment.

"Oi, Narumi. Renji…… Does he look okay?"

I couldn't raise my head at all. Meeting senpai's gaze if I turned around, facing his gentle words…… It scared me.

"That guy's view of money is almost zero. Does he look like he's still eating right? Or does he still like to crack lame jokes like before?"

"…… That's right."

I squeezed out an answer in a hoarse voice with some effort.

"That's fine. No matter how bad his environment is, it's unreasonable no matter how you look at eat……"

I felt Tetsu-senpai forcefully press his fist on the back of my seat.

"It's fine as long as we're still alive. We can still fight."

…… *That was what Narumi told me!* Hearing Tetsu-senpai's last words almost made me cry.

As long as…… We're still alive.

When I got down from the car at the charged parking lot near Hanamaru Ramen, I met Major coincidentally. "Eh? So it wasn't Vice Admiral Fujishima who got hospitalized?"

How can anyone say such a thing to the others straight on!

"Oh, Tetsu-san, so you're really back? How's the Niigata Horce Racing Alley?"

Major repeatedly shook his military backpack almost twice the size of his small body, walking to the back door of the car after that.

"I originally thought that it would be a world of ice and snow, but the temperature was quite normal. I could sleep on the streets thanks to that."

"To me, who once underwent a week-long simulated battle of

defense at Goryoukaku, Niigata is a southern land that is fine to me even if I go out naked."

Is there something wrong with your brain? Goryoukaku is a national monument, don't treat it as a site for your survival games!

"I saved the money for the lodgings and Shinkansen, betting all of it on the Four Boxes[3] of the Triple Team[4], and the difference of the last match was so small that it had to be determined with a video. I'd have jumped directly into the Sea of Japan."

"The coupon that you bought was the Ten Thousand Horses Coupon[5], right? How much did you win?"

"I got my money back just by winning one match, so I came back in a luxurious business compartment. It's because of this that horse racing is so irresistible!"

I stared at the silhouettes of the three walking towards the ramen shop, not moving even an inch.

I would get filmed by surveillance cameras if I approach the building, but I don't want Alice to see me. I got quite a few calls from her when I was in the hospital, but I didn't pick up the phone as I didn't know what to say to her.

"Oi, Tetsu, I heard that! You won a bet using a Ten Thousand Horses Coupon?" Min-san's voice echoed from the ramen shop. "Hurry up and clear your tab for the ramen!"

"No, they're funds for the future!" "Shut up and stop fussing! Pay up!"

Tetsu-senpai was caught by Min-san, who rushed out from the kitchen backdoor, with a head locking technique, and was directly dragged into the ramen shop, while Major and Hiro-san laughed while following.

On the other hand, I blankly stood by Hiro-san's car, silently listening to the conversation of the NEET Detective Squad from the gap between the buildings.

”Blast, my wallet turned really thin…… Go, call Yondaime here for a gamble. Doesn’t he have quite some money on him recently?”

”I’m telling you that he’s in a critical time right now! Weren’t you listening to Narumi-kun?”

”He didn’t request Alice, did he? Then let’s not care about him.”

”Tetsu-san, calling someone over here and swindling his money, this can’t count as ‘not care about him’.”

”Tetsu swindles the others as natural as breathing, so isn’t that the same as not caring about him?”

”Strictly speaking, Yondaime is quite stingy recently. For instance, I was just called to check out the locks in his office, and didn’t get much of a payment.”

”Eh? Even Major isn’t doing anything? Like wiretapping and the like?”

”I didn’t get any request.”

”That can’t be helped.” “Yeah, can’t be helped.” “If so, bothering him in such a critical moment isn’t too good, so why don’t we play three-man-mahjong?” “Great! I have a new winning theory recently —“

The seemingly happy conversation came into my ears. They were still the same— Though they were companions with Yondaime and the Renji-san before this, they looked as though they didn’t care at all.

I realized that I was rather irritable. You guys really plan not to do anything? If he doesn’t give you a request, you’ll just continue to stay idle? When you’re doing such a thing, Renji-san—

I bit my lip. I knew that it was useless if I did such a thing, and the anger was just directed at myself. The reason that Tetsu-senpai and the others do such a thing is because of their pride as NEETs. What about me? Not only being unable to do anything…… It’s possible that I don’t even know what I want to do.

*

That night, I kept looking at my phone while lying on my bed after I returned.

Alice would call me each hour, and there were five in total. She even left a message on her last call.

'Why are you not picking up the phone?! Listen well, remember to report to me on a regular basis, a regular basis! I do not know what happened to you, but since you were not hospitalized, you can at least call me back!'

You obviously know what's with me…… Besides, I never heard of a rule asking me to report to her on a regular basis. I really wasn't in the mood to call her back, so I just sent her a short message with the words 'I'm fine'.

After that, I sent a message to Mika-san as an apology. Though there were only three short sentences, it took me an hour. If she wishes to see the message, she'll have to wait until she returns to her company even if she goes out from the hospital tomorrow. If so, why didn't I just look for her at the hospital directly? But I couldn't do it. Though I was the person who dragged her in this……

As I tossed my phone aside, and was lying on my bed without even turning off the lights, Renji-san called.

Though it was a private number, intuition told me that it was most probably from Renji-san.

'Narumi? Is this Narumi's phone?'

A slightly hoarse voice that was good to hear came from the phone.

"…… Yes."

'Oh, good. Though I look like this, I actually like cleanliness quite a lot. I washed my hands a lotta times, nearly washin' away yer number that I copied down as well. In the end, the number couldn't be seen, and I tried for almost twenty times now. Yahoo— Great, great!'

I had the feeling that something that couldn't be melted in my heart was about to thaw, so I could only suppress the impulse, switching my phone to my other hand.

'How are yer injuries? Are they serious?'

Being asked like that so directly, I could only suppress my convoluted emotions.

"…… I'm fine, not too badly hurt. I just had some scratches and cuts."

'Really? That's fine.'

…… That's all? I nearly blurted that out. However, his actions were correct. If he really apologized to me, how should I answer him?

'So the fact that we met twice weren't coincidences, it's the same for Harajuku and Ueno— because our aims were actually the same. I wonder, is such a fate good, or is it bad?'

Renji-san's tone was the same as yesterday, as though we don't known each other's identities yet, and can joke while hitting the other. I couldn't differentiate whether it was his merit or his weakness. It might be both of them. Actually, there are things that are both of them in this world in the first place.

'That's right, Narumi. When are ya free?'

I suddenly thought, this is probably time for the dream of a capybara to stop, right? From the second time that I met Renji-san, the dream still continued, but is it finally time for us to wake up on this instant? Including the fire alarm at the livehouse, the assault when I was with Mika-san, all of them were—

But my cheeks that had a phone pressed to it still ached, so this isn't a dream.

Thus, I tried to speak in a rigid tone.

"I'm free any time, tomorrow is fine as well."

'Then let's meet tomorrow. Mnn—'

The tones of Renji-san and I were like we were trying not to touch the wounds just formed, and were just washing the wound with water, confirming a time and location for us to mee.

'Don't tell Sou about this…… Actually, this should be an unreasonable request, huh?'

The end of Renji-san's sentence was soft and tender.

'It's fine if ya bring a few more people, but remember to bring the T-shirt! That thing is really important.'

"Disregard Hirasaka-gumi for the moment, aren't you worried that I might call the police?"

As my voice turned husky, I could only swallow frantically to wet my throat.

"Why meet face to face? You can just tell me to send it somewhere…… Or something like that."

'That's true.'

A silence followed after the echo. What is he hesitating for? At the same time when I was thinking, a question seemed to seep out from my tongue— Do I really want to do such a thing?

'That's true, but I can't see Narumi if ya just send it over.'

I stood up from my bed, sitting down on my wooden floorboards while hugging my knees, thighs tightly pressed against my abdomen. If I didn't do that, the heated emotions that surged to my throat would have directly shot out.

'I'll have to meet again to explain properly.'

"That's…… True."

I blankly stared at the white, embroidered T-shirt spread messily on the floorboard.

”I will go alone. I have something to say to Renji-san as well.”

’Thanks.’

After hanging up, I finally stood up and picked up the T-shirt I was keeping for Renji-san. The butterfly that cannot fly because of a lack of wings spread on white snow.

It was quite some time until daybreak.

However, I still folded the T-shirt and stuffed it into my backpack, walking outside. The warmth of the afternoon sun still lingered faintly on the seat of my bike.

”You actually dare to appear before me with a look like this!”

With a look of displeasure, Alice stood on the bed in the NEET Detective Agency that had the air conditioner going strong, just like Nio.

”Disregarding my warnings, you came in contact with the world without order, was involved in an incident of violence as though it was natural, and put on bandages as well! And you actually dare to appear here shamelessly. Even though it is already this time.’

”This time? Alice, aren’t you always awake?”

As Alice’s attitude was as usual, my relief caused me to blurt out a small tsukkomi.

”This is the time when the servers are undergoing maintenance, a golden time for cracking passwords. I have no time to care about a person whose brain is only filled with daydreams like you.”

”Is that so…… I’m sorry…… Well, actually I am not here because of anything special at all.”

After hearing my words, even the intelligent Alice looked rather dazed. After all, since it’s two in the morning, it isn’t a time when one can visit the others without a reason.

”I don’t know why…… But I just wanted to see Alice.”

”W- W- W- What are you talking about!”

Alice sprang to the other side of the bed.

”I am very busy right now. If you wish to look for someone to play with you, are there not many night owls before the station or at the center of the city?”

I never thought that I would actually get such a serious scolding, how depressing. However, it’s quite normal when I think about it. Actually, the true reason that I came here was because I already don’t know how to deal with Renji-san’s matter, and was thinking that talking things over might clear away the confusion in my mind……

”Sorry, I’ll just go back then……”

When I carried my backpack and stood up, Alice immediately crawled over from her bed.

”What do you mean by going back right now? Useless fellow! At least think of a better excuse and answer me on the spot!”

”But…… Aren’t I being an eyesore? Didn’t you ask me to scram?”

”I neither said that you are an eyesore nor told you to get out!”

……. I really don’t understand you.

”S- Since you are here now!”

Alice continued to sit on her bed, prancing on it as though it was a trampoline.

”You get three cans of Dr. Pepper over here…… Ahh! T- They are not for you! I shall drink them all!”

I know that! Alice drank all of the nauseating carbonated drinks that I brought out from the fridge and opened for her, piling the empty cans on a small table at a side after that.

”My main point is, what were you doing? Living like an eel out of season rolling in a quagmire, going on without a purpose. Did you not know long ago what you should do?”

That’s right, I should have known it long ago. Convincing Yondaime to request for Alice’s help, thinking of a way for us to step into the battle between him and Renji-san after that.

But—!

”Perhaps you did not believe it although I said it so many times, and is feeling the terror of violence after a few jabs, and is planning to draw back?”

”No, that’s not true…… Well, perhaps just a little.”

Indeed, after I was beaten up, I finally understood something.

That would be the profound hatred between Yondaime and Renji-san that almost reached despair. Both of them treated destroying the other party as their aim, and the hatred directly involved me, and even Mika-san was dragged into it— I finally realized that it was really hard to turn back.

If Yonadime really requested Alice to handle the case, Tetsu-senpai, Hiro-san, Major and I must dash with the purpose of defeating Renji-san. Can I really handle such a thing?

With a speechless expression, Alice sighed and spoke again:

”…… At the south of Ikebukuro, there is a sporting goods store called Ex Area.”

I looked at the detective in confusion.

”It is a shop opened by a young man who is only twenty five. The man was still leading a criminal organization formed of nameless small potatoes a few years ago, but he clashed with Hinamura Souichirou who came to Tokyo not long ago, and his organization was vanquished just like that.”

What is she talking about? I kneeled down and supported my hands

before the bed.

”Hirasaka Renji is in that shop. I think the owner himself is probably working together with Hirasaka.”

To stand up, my kneecaps almost turned the bed over.

”…… Renji-san!? W- Why do you know about this?”

”Why do I know? Of course, I investigated it. Who do you think the person before you is?”

The NEET detective, Alice— having control of the massive information flowing in the whole world in her fortress that is smaller than six-tsubos, she is a diminutive queen.

”Did you not tell him how to contact you? I just checked the log of incoming calls. Long before I knew Tetsu and Yondaime, Hirasaka already disappeared from Tokyo. Which means, he does not know that there is an omnipotent detective here that can search for the source of the signal though his number is private— but I am very familiar with that man.”

Alice’ voice sounded like footsteps on the cold soil by a cemetery.

”Of course, I know how cruel and avaricious he is as well. He searched for scum to hinder the event, and all of them were members of other gangs exterminated not long after Hirasaka-gumi was founded. Listen well, they are people that Yondaime and Hirasaka chased out of the city together, but now, all of them follow Hirasaka. He only drew out and expanded the hatred of Yondaime and fear of him, and that was proven by the man Yondaime caught as well. I understand people who can unhesitatingly do these things very well. They are dangerous beasts.”

”Renji-san, he……!”

I opened my mouth in agitation, but I met Alice’s cold gaze, and could only freeze on the spot.

Renji-san, he— What? What did I want to say? A person like me,

how can I understand what occurred between him and Yondaime? Yondaime was right. I only met him twice, and chatted a bit. What do I know like this? I—

If I don't know anything, I have no other choice but to reaffirm it.

I pulled my backpack behind me over and opened it, taking out a grubby white package, placing it by the bed. Alice shook her head slightly, showing a sorrowful gaze at the same time.

"Can you help me keep this for the moment?"

"…… What is this?"

"It's Renji-san's T-shirt. To ask me to return this to him, he called me to ask me out just now. I'll go as soon as dawn arrives."

"What!? Why were you asked out so honestly? Have you forgotten that the one who was dealt with violently in broad daylight was you? And it was an order by Hirasaka as well."

"I know, but this shirt is something very important to Renji-san. He called me out just to get this back, so he won't make any trouble!"

"God knows! And if so, why are you asking me to keep—"

Alice's face almost reddened because of anger once more, but the heat suddenly evaporated.

"…… You mean, using it as a hostage?"

"Mnn…… Though it's a bit different, the feeling is somewhat similar."

I stared at Alice picking up and spreading the T-shirt open.

"If I return this to him, the relationship between Renji-san and I will be completely over."

And I have no reason to speak with him face to face as well.

An unfulfilled promise— No matter how bad the premise is, I'm

treating this as an anchor in my heart. As long as we follow the chain, no matter how many times, we will still meet.

As long as we are still alive.

So I decided to meet Renji-san with my body, words and ears once more.

”…… You are…… The same each time.”

Alice stuttered through her words, her eyes full of tears.

”How stupid are you going to be? Even a gorilla can still be intelligent to eat the ants in an anthill, knowing to use a stick, but why do you always shave off your own bones to stab into the anthill?”

”Mnn…… Sorry. Because I’m dumb…… I can’t find any other why.”

So angry that she could not speak, it was as though a lot of emotions flitted through Alice’s face in an instant. As I was planning to glance at her from below because of worry, she suddenly turned around, her black, silky hair that rose because of her action touching the tip of my nose. After that, Alice crawled to the innermost part of her bed, as though she was looking for something, and she came back once more.

And the item that was pressed on my nose was—

”…… An owl?”

A fluffy, egg-shaped plushie that I could hold with both of my hads — It was indeed an owl.

”That’s right. Her name is Minerva, a guardian goddess of soldiers. She is much more reliable than those baseless, ignorant assessments of safety of yours.”

”Mnn…… Okay.”

I looked at Alice’s expression, and looked at the owl’s wise, solemn eyes.

”…… Thank you.”

”Listen well, I am just borrowing her to you! You would better prepare yourself mentally for a punishment more severe than a deduction of your salary if you do not bring her back!”

I nodded in answer, keeping the doll carefully into my backpack. That moment, something suddenly covered me from behind, blocking my vision.

It was a blanket. I was taken aback and threw it aside, turning around to look at the bed.

”Since you are finished with your words, hurry up and sleep.”

From some time before this, Alice had already returned to her keyboard, saying while glaring at me with her eyes narrowed.

”Compared with your face, the color of the mud at Tokyo Bay looks healthier. You probably did not sleep well, right? And you actually rode here while your body is in such a condition at late night, how moronic.”

”Ah…… Mnn.” The attack of words really made me feel sleepy.

”Well…… Sorry for bothering you then, let me rest for awhile……”

Though sleeping in such a cold room is somewhat uneasy for me, since I did bring a sweater when I left home, it would probably be fine if I borrow the blanket as well. It’s much better than going home to sleep. But where should I sleep? If I sleep by the fridge, perhaps it can reduce the assault of the air conditioning? As I was about to walk out of the bedroom with the blanket, Alice halted me in an embarrassed tone.

”…… If you promise not to sniff the sheets…… Actually…… You can sleep at the edge of the bed.”

That was actually a choice that made me struggle, but because of my injuries and fatigue, the scales in my heart slanted very quickly. I went on this bed quite a lot of times anyway. Thus, I lied down in a place that was an extremely short distance from Alice’s back, and

being surrounded in a familiar smell, I fell into a short moment of respite.

1. ↑ A Japanese actor who starred in many yakuza movies.
2. ↑ A shrine worshipping Hachiman.
3. ↑ A way of betting by using four different combinations.
4. ↑ Disregarding the position, a horse betting coupon betting on the horses getting first to third place.
5. ↑ Horse coupon that has odds of over a hundred times if one wins the bet.

Chapter 4

I don't often go to Ikebukuro, so I was somewhat surprised at the scene before my eyes— Even though it was near afternoon in the holidays, the people on the whole street reduced visibly after I was about one street's distance from Meiji Road. After walking by a road with numerous ramen shops lined up together and reaching a corner with a Gusto Italian restaurant, a park appeared before my eyes. There was a fountain spouting murky water, a public restroom with outer walls spotted because of the sun, a sakura tree growing lush leaves, working hard to create a shade, and a crowd of senior citizens silently playing Chinese chess on a bench with the sun shining on it.

I picked up the backpack holding an owl plushie with my sweaty hands and carried it on my back once more.

There was a tall silhouette before the fountain, his hair dyed blonde looking as though it directly stuck the scorching rays of sunlight onto his hair. Below the sunny skies, his sunglasses completely covered his gaze. Eh? I suddenly noticed the cellphone in Renji-san's hand. Possibly because he noticed me, his speed of talking accelerated.

"…… I'm hanging up now…… Just think of a thing like this by yourself, I didn't say that it must be today…… Someone's coming! Shut up, I'm going back soon."

Renji-san hung up right after that. So this person speaks in standard Japanese on the phone…… He didn't seem like that when he spoke to me, and sounded like two different people.

"I bought a new cellphone, as I had some income. Everyone said that it's inconvenient when workin' and kept telling me to buy one."

Renji-san beamed and waved the cellphone in his hand.

"I told my number to a whole lotta people, and it kept ringin', it's

just plain annoyin'. That's why I don't like to use cellphones."

I stopped about five steps before Renji-san and lowered my head. Renji-san's job— Is it to hinder Yondaime's job?

There were just too many things to ask, but I still wished to change them to words and sentences.

"Well then…… Please tell me your number."

Renji-san smiled while spinning his light blue phone with his finger hooked on his phone strap.

"Ain't that useless? This is probably the last time we're meetin'."

He stopped spinning his phone and tilted his head in puzzlement.

"This isn't the last time. Because I didn't bring the T-shirt."

Renji-san narrowed his eyes, and it felt as though his gaze was cutting my face like a wire saw.

"If I return it to you right now, doesn't that mean we can't meet each other anymore? That's why……"

However, after thinly piercing my face, he opened the cover of his light blue cellphone.

"I'll send it to ya by infrared."

I stared at the liquid plasma screen after exchanging numbers. 'Hirasaka Renji'. I suddenly thought, it was the first time that I saw something that could be used to distinguish that he was Hirasaka in a glance.

The emotions of disbelief that was hidden in my heart had long been extinguished.

"If so, what're ya doin' here, Narumi?"

Renji-san's tone didn't seem to mind, and he continued to wave his phone, but his gaze hidden behind his sunglasses had long lost its

smile.

“I’m here…… to talk to you. Isn’t it the same for you, Renji-san?”

“In a scorchin’ place like this? I was plannin’ to finish this quick.”

“You said in the phone that you have something to speak to me of……”

“There are just two matters.”

Renji-san made the gesture of two to stop me from continuing.

“Firstly, thank ya. The only thing that made me happy for returning to Tokyo was only meetin’ you, Narumi.”

I tried not to avert my gaze from the pair of sunglasses strongly reflecting the summer sun.

“In the end, it turned out as I said, my relationship with Narumi got broken.”

Renji-san’s faint smile disappeared in the end as well.

“Another thing. Secondly, I’ll kill ya when I meet ya.”

Hot sweat erupted in my clenched fists.

“…… Is it because…… I’m helping Yondaime out in his job?”

“In Tokyo, is it popular for people to ascertain long established facts under the burnin’ skies?”

“You haven’t met Yondaime even once when you were here, right? After all, didn’t you part without saying a word to each other?”

“Look here. I came here to thoroughly break my old acquaintance. How can I show up before him like this?”

If so, why did you appear before me? Even though you already know that I’m a person standing on Yondaime’s side.

In truth, aren’t you still connected to each other?

“Although you shared sake with Yondaime, what on earth happened after that? Apart from sharing sake, it seemed like you exchanged something even more important with each other as well, but even so……”

“Even though chivalry is commonly joked of by other people, those black shirted muscled blockheads still remembered this, but this doesn’t really matter. Sou probably forgot about this as well.”

Aren’t the both of them still remembering this, that was what I thought. *Although it can’t be seen with the naked eye, the thing that you exchanged is still the most important to you.* When Yondaime or Renji-san heard of this from me, they averted their gaze and spat out ‘*Stop saying these useless words*’. Even so, they did not deny it.

They haven’t forgotten about it.

“Although we once shared sake, our bonds had already been cut. What, do you think I will go easy on Sou? There ain’t such a nice thing.”

“Why? ……. If there’s any reason for this, pray tell.”

“There ain’t any obligation for me to tell ya about this, Narumi.”

“Of course there is! Aren’t we sworn brothers!”

That moment, Renji-san’s smile seemed like it was melted by the summer sun, and was gradually lost in sand.

“Sou and I argued just for a woman— Do ya think ya can believe in that?”

Behind the sarcastic tone, I felt the bitter taste of metal shavings.

“……. Is that the person called Hison?”

“Oh? So ya heard of her?”

“Just her name. Yondaime just wouldn’t say anything about her.”

“Ain’t knowing about that enough already? About the name Hison,

only Sou and I…… and Min-san know about her, even though the rumor that Sou had a woman was quite widespread."

"Is she the person that Yondaime lived with when he first arrived at Tokyo?"

"That's right."

"Which would be the person who made the T-shirt embroidery?"

"She died before finishin' it. She said that she came to Japan from Korea alone, not havin' any relatives and was staying here illegally as well. And since the reason of her death ain't really legitimate, there wasn't a burial as well. Even I don't know where she was buried…… Even though such a thing is quite commonly heard of."

An illegitimate reason of death. I didn't even know where the sweat from my body flowed out from, and what sort of temperature I was bathed in anymore. Probably, it wasn't only because of the hot temperature.

"She was a strange woman. Even when we went back utterly bruised or completely bloody due to fightin' outside, she didn't seem to mind. And I was the person who wanted to bring the person Hison was workin' for down as well! In the end, she actually allowed me to go in and out of her room just like that. Not only did she teach Sou how to sew, she thought of teaching me as well. So idiotic. Who would do such a thing?"

"…… Why does it seem like the three of you were living together?"

"In fact, it was something like that. But Sou and I spent most of our time outside, while Hison wasn't at home at night because of work, so we didn't meet often. And she was really hot as well, people who often stay with her would definitely fall for her. I really can't believe that Sou actually never went for her."

"Ah— This……" As the topic suddenly turned realistic, I could only shift my gaze towards the ground. "Well…… Um…… Nothing happened between them? Even though they were living together?"

"Because he promised me……" Renji-san smiled weakly. "As we

were already sworn brothers, becomin' brothers in a way like that just didn't feel right! So we promised not to go for her before one of us found a woman better than her."

"This, ah…… Um……" Should I laugh at this moment?

"As she was workin' at a night club, it was somewhat dangerous for her. The only people who could go for her were Sou and I, and we'll beat them up if any other men dared to approach. We definitely wouldn't let anyone touch her— That was our promise."

That moment, I remembered Yondaime's words—

I couldn't protect her…… It was the same for Renji.

"But why— Why did she die?"

"D'ya really wanna know? What can ya do even if you know? It can't help anyhow."

Indeed, he was right. Being in the steaming hot air, I just felt as though my innards were substituted by chilly blocks of lead.

I think that was probably what tied Alice to her bed, a sense of emptiness.

Both the words of the deceased or the words of the living said for the dead would hurt someone. The cost of doing so would not turn into something that is better, while the words that are dug out from the grave are just ordinary words.

Even so, we still have to extend our hands.

If not, we wouldn't know where to go.

"Those times, our gang clashed with a true yakuza gang known as the Gotouda-gumi. As we chased away the head of the shop and snatched away their territory, it's normal for somethin' regretful to happen. Hison was killed by the yakuza."

My teeth chattered in my mouth.

“Sou was there that time. Not only that, I heard that that guy formed an alliance with the yakuza after that, and even accepted their money.”

“What……?”

“If the media broadcast the fact that Hison was killed, the delinquents would have a headache as well. And since she was an illegal immigrant, nobody would notice if they kept quiet about it, so it ended up like the woman called Hison did not exist from the start. I couldn’t even see her corpse, so probably she was buried somewhere in the middle of nowhere? Sou made a great deal.”

“How can this be……”

“Besides, I heard from Gotouda-gumi— Though it was a given, the one who was supposed to be stabbed was Sou. He was assaulted at his apartment, and used Hison who was by his side as a shield.”

“You actually believe in such a thing!? Yondaime…… How could he have done such a thi—“

“Sou admitted it himself, and looked like he didn’t care in the process. The opposin’ party gave him ten million yen to shut his mouth as well.”

I bent my back, clamped my fingers between my knees, and heaved a long sigh.

Yondaime admitted to it? And accepted other people’s money?

“Actually, I planned to rush to their office and slaughter the person who killed Hison. It was too large of a blow for me. Actually, beatin’ Sou up wouldn’t do me any good, but I still couldn’t help but beat him up.”

“That person…… Isn’t the type of person that you spoke of.”

“What do ya know?”

Below the strong rays of sunlight in the summer, Renji-san’s voice suddenly turned into a chilly blade.

“You’re just a kid runnin’ around by Sou’s side, whaddya think yer talkin’ about?”

That’s right. I really don’t know anything. However……

“I’m not just staying by his side. That guy sweated and bled by my side for quite a few times. Although I’m just a regular kid without many strengths…… Yondaime was willing to be sworn brothers with me.”

It was as though a crack appeared on Renji-san’s originally frozen face.

“The both of you said that your bonds have been severed and attacked each other— Perhaps you might think that your whole face has already turned bloody and can’t even see the opposing party, but there’s still me between you.”

I felt like my throat was about to get burnt because of my own voice.

“Because of my existence, you are still connected.”

Didn’t the two become sworn brothers with me because of a lie slightly thicker than water?

Renji-san stood up and pulled his goggles sunglasses down to his throat, and what appeared after that was a pair of cold wolf’s eyes.

“So what?”

I forcefully gulped down the saliva that had a slight taste of blood.

So what? Even though he looks as though he was going to cry every time he mentioned Yondaime, does he think that he could conceal it with his shades?

Renji-san probably hates Yondaime quite a lot, and even I could see that. But so what if that’s true? People like us live side by side in a bustling, crowded world, so it’s natural that such a matter would be encountered. Even though they were close to each other, they couldn’t communicate, and could only extend their claws to hurt

each other. Being forced to part because of unreasonable reasons, both goodwill and malicious intents were stuck and fixed by the mud called misunderstanding. However—

Such a truth is just too strange. Such a way of doing things probably has a fault somewhere around.

“— How much money did you take?”

Hearing my question, Renji-san’s brows furrowed slightly. It was the first time that I saw Renji-san looking as though he took a serious blow.

“If you really hate Yondaime, you could just beat him to death directly, but this way of doing things is just too strange. You took action just to interfere in the event from the start, so it’s obvious from first glance that you’re not the one who wants to do this. Who did you accept money from? How much did you get? Is it the organization called Yanagihara-kai?”

“Oh, aren’t ya smart? I’ve underestimated ya.”

Renji-san viciously showed his teeth.

“Even if I’m hired by the yakuza, so what? Do you think I will stop if ya give me more cash?”

“How can this be……”

Just when I was planning to speak, I stopped once more.

That’s right, things should be so. If giving him money could solve the problem, it wouldn’t turn out like this……

“Are ya an idiot? Who would accept money just for a dumb job like this?”

Renji-san answered in scorn.

“I planned to do this from the start. I want to break everything that Sou accumulated, it’s just a coincidence that my wishes coincided with my customer’s. Since I can get money by the way as well, why

won't I continue? Saying something like Sou and I are still connected? Yer thinkin too much of yerself. I didn't return to Tokyo just to play a game of brothers."

Renji-san slowly raised his hand holding the light blue cellphone, veins surfacing on the back of his hands, while the skin on his fingers tightened so much that it turned white. A sound like bones breaking rang, and then the cellphone was torn in half, the outer shell of the liquid plasma screen falling onto the ground. When I heard that sound, I realized that I was so scared that I almost couldn't breathe anymore. The bent, broken cellphone fell onto the floor, exposing its innards.

"What did ya say was connected again?"

Renji-san's voice was like the moaning of soil that was about to freeze.

"Don't let me see ya again, I'll kill ya."

Even when his silhouette and footsteps disappeared from my view, I still stood blankly below the scorching sunlight. The sweat on my forehead trickled into my eyes, hurting me.

I directly returned to my home and took a bath. After all, I went out from the previous night. Lying on the bed while wearing only a pair of jeans, I thought if I should just go to sleep. After I wake up, would everything end just like that? Let's just pretend nothing happened, and I'll start school on the first of September again, and I'll go to Hanamaru Ramen occasionally, going upstairs to take care of Alice, seeing Tetsu-senpai, Hiro-san and Major gambling over there even though they didn't have any money, and Yondaime would appear—

I clambered up and dried my hair that was still wet with a towel.

It's better if I just face reality…… Firstly, since I returned from the station directly, my bicycle was still at the ramen shop, I still had to return the owl plushie to Alice, and I still had to talk things out with Yondaime as well.

Even if I cover my ears and eyes with a towel, the world still wouldn't change. It would only change from summer to autumn, and from autumn to winter— And the cycle continues thus.

There were already guests at the detective agency.

"Narumi! Hurry up and save me! These two probably think that I am a potted plant or something!"

"Alice, don't move. Hiro-san, what do we do with the plastic wrap?"

"Mmm-hmm, Alice almost has next to no splits in her hair, and doesn't dye her hair as well, just this place is slightly dry, so we'll have to put on more conditioner and cover it with plastic wrap for one night."

Ayaka and Hiro-san clamped together Alice who was throwing a tantrum between them, and were undergoing a hair treatment lesson. There were combs, towels, hair dryers, conditioners, professional hairstyle magazines, clothes pegs and other articles on the bed.

"Ah, do you want to try this as well, Fujishima-kun? I heard that Hiro-san once taught me about this, but I forgot."

Ayaka gave me a radiant smile.

"If you dare to teach even Narumi, do not think that you can ever step into this office!"

I sighed and sat by the fridge outside the bedroom. The reason that I was relieved was probably not only because of the extremely cold air conditioning in the room.

"Ayaka, just follow my instructions after this, I have something to discuss with Narumi-kun."

"Got it."

"Uuuu, it hasn't ended?"

Ayaka forced the tearful Alice to sit on her lap and happily picked up a comb.

On the other hand, Hiro-san left the bed, walked through the door of the bedroom and said softly after squatting down by my side:

“The company of the designer seemed to have called just now. Do you know about this, Narumi-kun?”

It was Mika-san’s company. I wonder how Mika-san is right now. From Hiro-san’s heavy voice, I felt a hint of coldness and couldn’t help but raise my head.

“I heard that the company wants to withdraw from this job, if it’s really related with acts of violence……”

“At…… Such a critical moment?”

“Nnn, it couldn’t be helped. After all, someone was hurt so much that she was hospitalized.”

“What about Mika-san? How is she? Is it possible……”

“She dealt with all the procedures and already got out of hospital. I planned to visit her just now, but I was too late.”

I was slightly relieved. Good thing her wounds didn’t worsen or she had to continue to stay in the hospital.

“Eh? Narumi-kun, don't you know? Didn’t Yondaime contact you? Mii-chan didn’t call you directly as well?”

“No……”

Probably it’s because Yondaime doesn’t want to speak to me? Anyway, he knows that I would know of it if he tells Hiro-san, and I’m just in the lowest level, only in charge of advertising on the internet. Although I sent a message to Mika-san, it was sent to the number at her company as well, so she might not have seen it if she just got out of the hospital.

No, it’s possible that she doesn’t want to read it nor reply me. As I

caused her to be dragged into an incident like that, perhaps she doesn't want to have any connections to us anymore?

That meant that the influence of Renji-san's medding gradually intensified.

"What should we do now? Anyway, I know Mii-chan's phone number as well, so let's just use this chance to get her, and using my sweet talk to convince her to continue. Ah, but since she is still hurt, she probably can't be so active on the bed."

I hugged my knees while listening to him bluffing, but Hiro-san suddenly approached.

"…… If you don't do a tsukkomi on it, it feels somewhat awkward."

"Eh? A– Ahh, fine, fine…… I thought that you were seriou

"Actually, I'm always serious when it comes to women."

Is this the time to act cool?

However, Hiro-san is better at me in that aspect. Actually, all of the members in the NEET Detective Squad were like that. Even though they had an excellent engine, and their fuel's full, the key was usually not inserted.

"…… Um, what are Major and Tetsu-senpai doing right now?"

"Ah, Major……" Hiro-san shifted his gaze apologetically. "He went to Ikebukuro with some fans of survival games, saying that there's an important battle."

I sighed. Playing survival games while holding an air gun in such stifling weather? How leisurely of him.

"Tetsu is borrowing money from underground banks right now, saying that the police was looking for him as well."

"Eh? What…… What did he do this time?" Commiting crimes because of a lack of money?

“I don’t know, but you probably don’t need to worry so much.”

Although Hiro-san’s smile was extremely radiant when he said that, it would probably still give the person listening an impression of this.

You don’t need to worry about this.

You still don’t have the right to worry about this.

I kept rubbing my forehead on my knees and sighed for quite some times, and even started to suspect if my gut and intestines were going to flow out from my mouth.

“You went to see Hirasaka again, right?”

Hiro-san asked nonchalantly. Why did he know? That’s right, he probably heard from Alice.

That moment, I finally understood that what I did was actually a kind of betrayal to Yondaime. Yes, I went to see him again. Seeing Renji-san, and parting after saying something meaningless.

“Did you get a way of contacting him? Because he still owes me some money…… Actually, he haven’t returned me the money for losing at dice. So I was thinking of calling him to Hanamaru Ramen so that I can have a chance to get my money back.”

I really don’t know why he can still laugh like this, as it’s already impossible for such a warm promise to still exist. I should have first reported this to Yondaime to allow a large number of members in Hirasaka-gumi to conceal themselves at the place we promised to meet at, catching Renji-san in one go. Thus, everything would be solved perfectly— Because that person came alone without being guarded as well.

I felt a hot flow in the interior of my nose— a sign of coming tears.

That person did indeed go alone. Was it because of his trust in me? Or was it because it didn’t matter even if he was caught?

Why was the person stuck in this position me?

The person clamped between Yondaime and Renji-san is just a lost, flustered, incapable kid.

When I was about to hug my knees again, a roar suddenly rang.

“Narumi, hurry up and bring me back my Minerva! And your report!”

When I raised my head, I saw the NEET detective who was sitting at the edge of the bed with her feet stepping on empty space. Akaya, whose hands were full with a comb and a towel, was still happily combing the long hair that was like black honey.

“Why do you think you are staying here? Is it possible that you will forget that you are my assistant if I do not remind you of it every thirty minutes?”

“Eh…… Ah, nn…… Nnnn.”

I stood up while grabbing the hand of Hiro-san, who was smiling wryly, while Alice wore an annoyed expression, rapidly snatching away the owl that I took out from my backpack.

“And also, this is your lost belonging. Really, you kept wailing out that it was so cold, so cold, when you were sleeping, and in the end, you kicked away your sweater and the blanket when I just raise the temperature slightly. You are so spoiled that I am speechless.”

Alice tossed the sweater that was scrunched into a ball to me. That’s right, I wore it yesterday night, and left it here in the end without taking it out. That moment, Ayaka looked rather shocked.

“Fujishima-kun, you slept here yesterday? Eh? Eh? On Alice’s bed?”

“…… Eh? Mnn, uh huh. Since it was already late night, and Alice said that I could use the very edge.”

“T- That won’t do—! Why are you so insensitive every time?”

As Ayaka suddenly stood up, Alice nearly fell from her lap, while I hastily held onto her.

“What are you doing! That was dangerous!”

Alice, who fell on my lap, turned back in anger.

“It’s only dangerous for Alice! Listen, in any case, Fujishima-kun is still a boy! Although he’s so slow that he’s completely untroubled with anything, and doesn’t mind even if he eats soy eggs from last month, he’s still a boy. If you sleep together on the same bed, there’s no guarantee that nothing would happen!”

What harsh criticism. Wait a minute……. Oi! What were you saying!

“U- U- Uuu…… What do you think would happen?” Alice widened her eyes. “I have lent my bed to Narumi twice, but nothing happened.”

“But wasn’t it like he was unconscious last time?”

While smiling wryly, Hiro-san added at a side.

“Sleeping together on the same bed under normal circumstances really isn’t too good.”

“What, even Hiro…… Uwaa! Ayaka, do not do that, I am not a kitten!”

Ayaka grabbed the back of Alice’s back and dragged her to the innermost side of the bed. Hiro-san walked over after that as well, and the two explained to Alice who was between them: “Actually, sleeping together actually means……” ,while Alice’s face slowly turned redder and redder like the setting sun on the Caribbean Seas.

“Narumi! You shameless fool!”

The third time!? Can you please not give Alice strange ideas?

“From now on, you are not allowed to pass this absolute line of defense without a visa!”

Alice piled up her dolls at the edge of the bed to form a wall, while I was so speechless that I could only scratch my head.

“Erm…… It’ll be inconvenient if I have to send meals or Dr. Pepper to you.”

“Uuu…… The said visa would be the red cans in the refrigerator!”

So I’m allowed to cross the borders just by holding Dr. Pepper? Whatever, do as you wish!

“Fujishima-kun, please be more careful as well! Alice is still young!”

“Don’t treat me as a child!”

How mystifying. Although Hiro-san still saved me in the end. He told Ayaka that we probably had some official business to discuss, and kidnapped her out of the office.

“Is this really fine? Letting Fujishima-kun stay alone with Alice?”

“It’s fine, fine……” Hiro-san answered while holding in his laughter, and I could see that the back of his silhouette was shaking as well. Ayaka seemed to be truly worried, but Hiro-san really just wanted to look at the show. What an annoying fellow.

When the two of them walked out of the corridor and closed the door, the detective agency finally recovered its usual nostalgic silence, with the sounds of many cooling fans overlapping together.

I faced the annoyed Alice who was looking at a side, and started my report.

And of course, the contents would be of Renji-san. Alice’s chilly gaze only returned when I spoke of him undergoing his job of hindering because he received money from the yakuza.

“It is somewhat incomprehensible— Hirasaka Renji’s motive.”

Alice said while tapping on the keyboard on the moveable table by her side with one hand.

“Hasen’t his motive been said already? It’s to completely destroy the event Yondaime is preparing for right no……”

“In my opinion, it does not seem like it is done just to destroy the event.”

“Eh?”

Alice just ignored the confused me, and continued to speak.

“For instance, the reserved event location at Shinjuku. After the incident at Akasaka occurred, Hirasaka Renji once visited there. And he brought along a few people who assaulted the Akasaka music hall as well.”

I could only stay speechless.

“Why…… do you know such a thing?”

“What do you mean by why? Because I investigated about it. The said live house always uploads a lot of clips of concerts. Of course, since the video that was uploaded online cannot be used due to low distinguishability, I hacked into their computer to steal the original file. It was taken quite clearly.”

To her hacking and searching ability, I could only say that it was stunning.

“However, they did not do anything that time. Regarding their popularity, the venue at Shinjuku is not worse off than the live house that got its power distribution box damaged by them. Why do you think this is so?”

I could not answer. How can I know a fact that even Alice doesn’t know of?

“Of course, I do not know the reason as well, but I can still make assumptions of a few possibilities. The venue at Shinjuku is where the last performance will take place, and the booking of tickets has not started yet. I am thinking, is this reason possible?”

“Because the booking of tickets……. Hasn’t started yet?”

“That is correct. The tickets for the Akasaka and Ueno concerts have already been sold out, so the performance will not be halted even if

those places had some trouble. However, if trouble is made at places where the tickets have not been sold yet, the performance might really get cancelled."

I crossed my arms and pondered about Alice's words. They were indeed quite reasonable.

"However…… These can only count as circumstantial evidence. It's possible that they're just thinking of making trouble, only that some trouble occurred at Shinjuku, causing them to be unable to play out their plan."

"Of course, such a possibility exists as well. But speaking of circumstantial evidence, there is a more pressing matter. If their motive is just to halt the event, why didn't the people who could unhesitatingly resort to violence assault the performers beforehand?"

"Ah……"

I opened my palm to cover my mouth. Indeed, that's true.

"In fact, the only ones assaulted were you and the designing executive. As a result, the advertising company would not accept the case anymore, and it will indeed cause a great blow to the event, but the designers that can take their place are like stars in the sky. If they are aiming to halt the event, should they not attack a more irreplaceable part?"

"But…… Isn't the party supporting Renji-san the previous organizers? To those people, the band is merchandise that can be snatched back, right? So that's why they're not hurting them……"

"Your assumption cannot stand as well. If so, Yanagihara-kai would have long sent a threatening letter so that Hirasaka-gumi would return the job."

I crossed my arms yet again and fell into silence. The branches of my assumptions were completely snapped.

"…… Frankly speaking…… Renji-san probably isn't going to stop the event itself, right?"

Or perhaps he's allowing it to proceed as usual, and on the day of the event— Starting a serious incident that would cause victims to appear?

The thing that that person wanted to destroy— It's everything that Yondaime accumulated up till now. That thing definitely isn't the event nor the event coordination company. Yondaime's 'reputation'— the thing that was built after a long time— his credibility, right?

"Those are just assumptions. Deciding things like this is very dangerous. Besides……"

Alice looked at the row of monitors lined up behind her and explained in a self-deprecating tone:

"We did not accept a formal request. I can only place my fingers on the cover of a coffin and squat at a side, silently awaiting the dawn that will never come."

I sat at the border of the bedroom and corridor, raising my head to look at the detective's face.

"…… You can investigate…… Right?"

The black hair fluttered. Alice looked at me with a gaze full of doubt.

"Alice, if you're willing to, even if Yondaime did not put in a request, you can still find out everything that occurred between him and Renji-san by using Tetsu-senpai, Major and Hiro-san's powers, right?"

"Of course. But what about it?"

"Why aren't you doing so?"

"Are you trying to tell me that I should do that?"

"Not really…… I know that you won't do that. I just want to hear a concrete reason from you."

Because you're a NEET, because of your pride as a detective……. Can you ignore this just for reasons like this?

Even though it could be seen from a glance that her heart is in pain.

Alice grabbed a few plushies from her hill of dolls and pressed it to her chest, causing a hole to open up in the wall. Chilly wind blew between us.

"…… The so-called thoughts are things that are not concrete."

The softly spoken words fell onto my knees along with the air conditioning.

"If it is only in the frames of thoughts, even contradicting matters can co-exist. However, I know how large the distortion and pain would be when they are directly reflected in the real world. It is the same for you. When Ayaka thought of leaving the world without saying anything, how did you, who just blankly came in contact with those thoughts, turn out in the end?"

Because of the question, I was pulled back to the cold, bitter days.

Ayaka, who jumped down from the rooftop of the school without saying a word. I, who felt as though my heart was torn, and could only be miserable alone for a few days.

And what sewed my heart together once more was Min-san's cold dessert, Tetsu-senpai's fists, and—

Alice's words.

"That is why words are required."

Her words overlapped with my thoughts.

"Words can indeed reach a cruel state. They will cut reality open, causing them to turn into a set of planes, causing contradictions to be unable to exist. That is why words are the most important thing in the world."

The most important, and cannot be seen.

“However, words are like a sharp blade as well. They will turn thoughts into reality, but will unhesitatingly obliterate parts that have not been formed, so that is why detectives must keep playing the role of a messenger, and drag the words that sank under the dark chasm to the sunlight. This is a detective’s responsibility. Other people’s thoughts that have not been formed cannot be changed to words.”

I hugged my knees with my hands, silently thinking of Alice’s words.

And the thoughts that have not been formed in Yondaime’s heart.

In the office of Hirasaka-gumi, a few stout gang members unhappily sat on the sofa or the desks.

“Aniki, thanks for your hard work!”

“Thanks for your hard work!”

I still haven’t got used to being greeted by so many people. After I looked around for a bit, I found that Yondaime, Pole and Rocky couldn’t be seen.

“Aniki, it’s great that you’re okay!” “If we were by your side……”

They approached, and held my bandaged hand as well, making me unable to respond.

“Those guys, actually daring to attack Aniki!” “Those blasted fellows……”

However, the hot-blooded Hirasaka-gumi members, who would have usually got so mad that red steam would almost be emitted from their mouth, could only suppress their anger this time.

“…… Why is Hirasaka-san doing this?”

“Aniki, is this true? Is it possible that they’re just lies?”

“Sou-san won’t tell us anything……”

“Isn’t it said that they exchanged something more important than their lives when they underwent the ritual? All of us know about this, and we kept believing that Hirasaka-san would come back one day.”

“How can this be! He…… He came back after so much!”

I could only lower my head and look at my toes.

“Is it true that Aniki already met Hirasaka-san?”

“Aniki, what’s with this? Hirasaka-san is really planning to do us in……”

“Nn, nnnnn……” I walked back a few steps and leaned against the steel door. “I didn’t speak much to him, so I'm not too clear about things……”

I could only change the topic with a cowardly excuse.

“Why! We originally thought that we would be invincible if Hirasaka-san returns.”

“Aniki, what should we do? We don’t want to go against Hirasaka-san.”

“That person and us are like sworn father and sons. He’s the same as Sou-san, and is our senior. Why……”

I don’t have any idea even if you ask me— But I could only swallow those words back into my stomach. Speaking of all this is no help at all. I think they probably know that as well, but they couldn’t avoid themselves from discussing it.

“Excuse me…… Where is Yondaime?”

“Sou-san said that he’s going to visit a company or the like.”

“Recently, he often goes out without saying anything.”

I felt that I was really useless when I realized that I felt relieved. I had to report to Yondaime about meeting Renji-san once more and some other matters. Though I had such plans in my heart, when I thought of the scene when we converse, my heart sank once more. Just because of that, I came to the office without even giving them a call— And prayed for him to be out coincidentally.

After Alice said so much, I was still afraid of 'words'. I'm so useless.

Walking into the dark study of the office and telling them to allow me to be alone, I sat before the computer without even turning on the lights. When I checked my inbox online, I noticed that there weren't any replies from the advertising company. What does Yondaime plan to do after this? The direction of the design has almost been finished, and the ones left are only some odd jobs. Perhaps he's going to look for any company to do the follow up work? He won't tell me to do everything, will he?

I stood up from the chair and lied down on the bed used for short breaks. There was a smell of dry dust.

Oh well, why don't I just give up already?

Although I haven't got my salary yet, it isn't like I'm in a state where I won't be able to cope without getting the money. As long as I am not related with this matter, I won't need to be troubled or get beaten up anymore. Besides, Alice and Yondaime told me not to meddle anyway.

As for the reason I'm feeling downcast— Probably it's because not only did the things that I did not help, I caused the matter to develop towards a bad direction as well. Self-righteously thinking that there's a deep misunderstanding between Yondaime and Renji-san, and kept firmly believing that they exchanged something important that cannot be seen with the naked eye— Such stories that were like fairy tales.

The thing that once existed between them had already vanished completely due to critical damage. Only I was standing in the middle of a sandbank that was about to sink, swirling the sand below my feet.

The identities of the people assisting Renji-san had already been mostly made clear. No matter which side bleeds, it isn't something that a dazed high schooler should meddle in.

So I should just groggily go back to my holiday.

As long as I stuff everything to the other side of the glaring sunlight, my world can be like eggshell that was soaked in vinegar, maintaining a soft, sticky, but seemingly unblemished appearance.

However, when I picked up my phone, it was like my whole hand froze, and couldn't even press one button.

When did it start? Me being unable to even lie to myself.

In the past, it should be easy for me to change my way of separating the things by my side, renaming them, and use a thought to cover the previous one. However, I came in contact with too much passion, and knew that some things will still spread to me through the earth and air even when I cover my eyes and ears in a starless night. So— I cannot ignore this.

What should I do? Is there anything—

"— Hello, everyone! Is Fujishima-san here?"

A voice suddenly rang behind me, making me almost fall down from the bed.

Is it possible that the voice just now is……? The voices of the confused gang members rang faintly at the other side of the door.

"So sorry for disturbing you all of a sudden. I heard that Fujishima-san is over here?"

Using the faint illumination of my cellphone screen, I ran towards the door while dodging the hill of cardboard boxes. As soon as I pushed the door open, my eyes were assaulted by strong light without prior warning.

"Aniki, um…… A strange woman……" "Suddenly barged inside."

“Fujishima-san!”

Coffee-colored curly hair and a shout jumped at the same time. It was Mika-san. The person standing at the entrance of the office was indeed Mika-san…… And she ran in my direction. She was wearing a miniskirt with a transparent shoulder strap. However, the bandages on her arms and kneecaps looked quite painful.

“Fujishima-san, are you okay? Waa! You’re so severely hurt!”

“N- Not really, your are more severe, Mika-san.”

“I’m fine. I’m in tip top shape, and I can walk as well! Since the cane was too troublesome, I left it at home.”

Errr…… That can’t count as being fine, can it?

“Speaking of which, our boss arbitrarily decided to stop our collaboration, so sorry for that!”

As Mika-san apologized while lowering her head in the speed of a hammer, the Hirasaka-gumi members around me and I were overwhelmed by her imposing manner and stepped back three steps.

“It seemed to be a decision that was made when I was still in the hospital. I was extremely furious! Earlier today, I rushed to the company from the hospital and talked things out with the boss. Fujishima-san, you’re probably troubled as well, right? This is something that we came up with together! I really had my life on this case!”

“Err…… Well…..”

I repeatedly blinked and stared at Mika-san’s face.

Which means……

“Are you…… willing to continue the case……?”

“But of course! It’s more like I was slightly sad as you didn’t contact me immediately…… Eh? Fujishima-kun, what’s wrong? Eh, uh, eh?

U- Um…… Is it because I'm not reliable enough? You don't need to look like you're going to cry, do you?"

"N- No…… Not really."

I hurriedly wiped my face with my palms in force and pretended that nothing happened while fanning my face with my hands—Although the thing that rushed to the depths of my throat almost couldn't be suppressed already.

"…… Is it really fine?"

"About the company, I'll try to convince them, and I heard from the boss that Sou-san apologized at the company himself as well. How can I leave this case at the side like this!"

The Hirasaka-gumi members sank into a slight commotion, while I widened my eyes as well. Yondaime apologized to the company himself? No, that person does indeed know the ways of the world very well, and doing such a thing is a given, however……

Until just now, I was still lying in the dark room, and was even considering to leave all my work aside and escape.

"Fujishima-san? Uh……. Sorry for coming here without prior notice, as I just know the email address you use for contact…… And since the company gave me a week's break because of me getting hospitalized, I was too free, so……"

"Nono, I don't mean that."

I pushed Mika-san out of the office while the sun setting in the west shone on us diagonally at a side. It felt as though we just woke up, and the innocence that originally stuck onto our skin was gradually vaporized by the scorching sunlight.

"I…… should apologize instead."

"But you didn't do anything wrong, did you?"

"It's just because I didn't do anything, but I caused Mika-san to get involved all of a sudden……"

“Ah, no, there’s no such thing!”

Mika-san forcefully thumped my shoulders. As my injuries hadn’t healed yet, I nearly made an odd cry, and could only suppress myself.

“I heard that Hirasaka-gumi seemed to be in trouble…… But it’s hard on our company as well. Since our company is so small, it isn’t often for us to get such a large case…… In the end, the president and the boss actually said that they don’t want to have any trouble with the yakuza! Even though I already told them that Sou-san isn’t a yakuza! How could it be possible for such a young, good-looking yakuza to exist? Fujishima-san, why don’t you scold me as well? Something like ‘What the heck is your company doing!’ or the like. Don’t be so mindful!”

Mika-san’s smooth shoulders that reflected the sunlight and her arms wrapped in bandages were quite sharp, so I could only shift my gaze.

“Then that’s that. I’ll count on you once more when your injuries get better. I’ll have to trouble you to update the blog as well! And I’m going to Alan Garba right now as well!”

“Eh?”

“The idea that you proposed, the T-shirt used for promotional purposes! It won’t do if we don’t hurry!”

Oh yeah— Using a friend’s famous second-hand clothing shop Alan Garba to print the event on the shirt, and selling them to the young people on the streets. Even though it was my idea, I forgot about it completely as I was busy dealing with other matters.

“Then…… Allow me to go as well. It should be easier for you to discuss with me present, right?”

After all, the owner of the second hand shop would feel bad refusing my request because of certain reasons.

“But Fujishima-san’s injuries are still so serious……” “Aren’t your injuries more severe than mine?” “What a quick tsukkomi!”

“Ah— Sorry, in any case, let’s hurry!”

I breathed in deeply, and relocated my pace.

Do things that I can do now.

“Because this is my job.”

Mika-san nodded while smiling.

It was already evening when we finished our discussion and walked out of the shop. Alan Garba was packed with young women. Since it was only a street away from the busy district, and there was a Yoshimoto Kogyo performance hall by it as well, customers kept gushing inside right until closing time. It seemed like Mika-san wanted to pick out some clothes as well, as she kept looking back, but she still reminded herself to prioritize her work in the end, and picked up her phone after that.

“Hmm…… The calls to Sou-san just wouldn’t get through.”

She placed her phone by her ear for quite some time and showed me a troubled expression after that.

“There shouldn’t be much trouble with the T-shirts, so I wanted to report this to him.”

“Allow me—“ To tell him…… I wanted to say that, but I stopped after that. Is Yondaime still willing to speak to me? It just seemed like I damaged the trust that he had for me after some time because of my insensitivity. After all, the past that he wasn’t willing to mention was dug out by me…… Including Renji-san and the woman called Hison.

“That won’t do. The one who accepted the case was me, I’ll report it to him. Spinach is a basic condition for working in the society. [1]”

“Meaning, report, contact and communication?”

“Yes, yes. In any case, taking the initiative to speak is very

important. I'll send him a message first."

Actually, it's probably the most important thing while doing anything in this world.

Actually having so many people say the same thing to me, is it possible that I'm a person bad at communicating in other people's eyes?

"That's why, remember to contact me after you finish the discussion of the design tomorrow!"

"I understand…… Report, contact and communication, I'll remember it."

Although we had to ask Yoshiki-san to sew the design onto the T-shirt immediately, Mika-san said that she had a meeting that she must go to the next day, so I had no other choice but to head to Kita-Senju alone.

"I heard that the shop owner is really good looking. Is that true?"

"Eh? Ah, yes….. Well…… He's quite good looking."

"Having a name like 'Yoshiki', it sounds like he's the Yoshiki in the visual kei band 'X'! So does that mean he has a sickly beauty like that of visual kei bands?"

"No, it's completely different. Their names are written differently as well."

If I'm not mistaken, the Yoshiki in X should be written as 佳树, while善喜was written on Yoshiki-san's card that I handed to Mika-san.

"Whoa! This name seems to be quite candid!"

As you said, he's indeed a candid, good-looking man.

"I want to go as well! What a pity! But if I don't defeat president in the meeting tomorrow, this case would be closed. They're probably letting me continue my break, deciding on things by themselves."

I couldn't help but think: If anything wrong occurs, the efforts that we put in till now might be lost— Why can this woman still be so energetic? However, I hoped that she would help out more. As for me— I should at least send a message to Yondaime.

I sat on the sailings of the road and took out my phone, and Mika-san said at a side while I was pondering of what I should write:

"Are you sending a message to Sou-san? Well then…… Why don't you add more emoticons? And add a heart at the end!"

"Wait a minute, please don't do that!"

Such an embarrassing message was nearly sent. So close……

"At these times, you should be more open about these, then you can speak whatever you want to when you meet."

"I'd have been killed before I speak whatever I want!"

"But emoticons can express the emotions that cannot be said in words……"

Nonono, even if you speak in words like those from a love poem, I won't be fooled. However, if there are really such emoticons, I would really like some.

What should I say to Yondaime? How can I start the topic? After going round in a circle, my thoughts still returned to that point.

After the next afternoon, I went on the Chiyoda Line from Omotesando Station. From what I remember, Chiyoda seems to be near the Saitama Prefacture, but it wasn't as far as I thought, as I reached it after about thirty minutes of taking the subway.

"Narumi-kun, I've been waiting for you!"

When I reached Wakagi Crafts Store, Yoshiki-san was chatting with two girls who seemed to be college students. He immediately stopped chatting when he saw me and waved at me. His slim figure

wearing a pair of tight fitting jeans looked even slenderer while being covered by an apron with the name of the shop printed on it. How crazy would Mika-san go if she sees him, I wonder. After that, I walked around the counter and sat on the chair that he handed to me. *Who is that person? What's his relationship with the shop owner?* All the females in the shop shot me such glances non-stop, making me feel extremely uncomfortable.

"Very sorry— Let's chat again later!" Yoshiki-san consoled the girls slightly and turned around after that. Basically, Yoshiki-san kept staying in the counter, and it felt like he was a rental books owner from olden times.

"About the design of the logo, I made about eight of them."

A whole stack of Cham papers with large, trendy band logos drawn on them were handed to me. Except for the same black thrush on the letter 'i', there was a variety of pictures, with pictures that had a sense of trendiness and even those that had a somewhat mechanical look.

"How is it?"

I couldn't help but moan.

"…… It doesn't seem right?"

"Nono…… To be honest, each one is great."

If time allows for it, I would even think of putting all of them on the website to allow everyone to vote. Regretfully, the promotional T-shirts had to be made as soon as possible, or the effect would drastically decrease, so there's not too much time.

"If you really want me to pick one……" "Nnn, if you want to choose one out……"

Yoshiki-san and I pointed at the same picture at the same time, a slightly Japanese styled picture. We laughed out loud after glancing at each other.

After that, I used the laptop computer that I brought to edit the logo

and the promotional text, pasting them on the sample T-shirt. There were five colors in total, and each of the lines were simple and clean. Since there isn't much time anymore, let's just decide it like this?

"So we're going with this? But this picture will be more sharp if you use embroidery instead of printing it on."

"Nonono, our budget wouldn't be enough for that."

Yoshiki-san laughed while saying 'That's true". Even if they're printed on, it should look quite cool as well.

"The girl called Mika called me, saying that I can decide it by myself. Is that really fine? I heard that even the band members said that they're letting me handle things."

"It's just because the band members let us handle everything that makes me feel uneasy."

I heard that it's because the previous organizer was too terrible. Possibly because of that, we got their complete trust just because we handle things normally. That made me slightly troubled as well, though it isn't anything bad.

"Have you met the band members? I saw them on the net, and every one of them was quite cute."

"No, I haven't met them in reality, but Yondaime probably meets them quite often."

"Nnnnn, is it really fine if we handle things?"

Do we need to listen to Yondaime's opinion? I thought while taking out my phone, but did not have the courage to press the button, and could only sigh after reaffirming that I didn't receive any message. After seeing my expression, Yoshiki-san seemed to have something to say, but since there was a female customer calling him at the other side of the counter, he just slid over with his chair after apologizing to me.

"Yoshiki-san, was this on a rack? Can I take it directly?"

“Nnn, sorry for the trouble.”

Eh? Looking at Yoshiki-san’s silhouette, I suddenly thought— Why does he allow customers to climb on a ladder to take the merchandise at high places? When I think about it, this person almost always sits on a chair……

“…… Do you have trouble with your feet?”

I only thought after I asked Yoshiki-san in a low voice, isn’t this way of asking somewhat rude?

“Ah— Nnn…….” He looked slightly embarrassed, but he still answered. “It’s not like I have trouble with my feet. It’s just that I had some of my innards removed in a surgery, so the doctor told me not to stand while working if possible.”

“…… Eh?” Then he was probably hurt badly that time?

“I originally worked at a night club, and I couldn’t continue it in the end. At first, I thought that it’ll be fine if I just sit down while making crafts work, but it isn’t like that at all.”

“It isn’t like that from the start!”

It just seems like this person is a bit out of touch with society. Talking with him is slightly tiring. He probably used up quite a lot of money when he started his shop, how can it be decided by such a simple reason? I’m not too sure of this person’s background, but since he’s senior to Yondaime, is it possible that he was a NEET in the past? Although he doesn’t seem like one, it’s really hard for one to ask the other person if he is such a person in person. That’s right, I remember that he knows Min-san as well, right? Let’s just ask her directly next time.

“Hina helped me out in the busiest times when the shop just opened, and now the customers are helping me out, so it still counts as passable.”

“Eh? What? You’re talking about Yondaime? Isn’t that guy really mindful of money? Wouldn’t he ask for a high salary?”

“But I asked him to help me for free?”

I breathed in deeply to express my helplessness. Although he’s a senior who knows him from long ago, I really can’t think of another person who can treat Yodnaime like this, and I’m slightly envious…… Nonono, and I actually imagined myself calling Yondaime ‘Hina’, it’s just too impossible.

“Actually, I feel stranger seeing everyone scared of Hina to death.” Yoshiki-san gave me a smile.

“My impression of him is that he probably started to threaten and scare people from the time he was born……”

“Haha, there’s no such thing. When Hina wasn’t too familiar with Tokyo, he was scared like a small rabbit as well. And he even complained to me that the messy subway structure makes people feel lost, there aren’t covers on the lights in the trains and the like. So cute.”

Does this count as cute?

“He probably did a lot of things that forced himself, huh? That guy is a bit too tough, and he’s slightly too good at taking care of other people, so naturally many people followed him. However, these people probably aren’t thinking of relying on him, but want to beat him up instead.”

“……. Then what about Yoshiki-san?”

“Of course, I’m the type that wants to rely on him, you know when you take a look at my body!” Hearty laughter, “Actually Hina only has one true friend that can support him when he’s in trouble, but they got in a large fight. I wonder what that person is doing right now.”

So he knows Renji-san as well? But it doesn’t seem like he knows that he’s already back. Probably Yondaime didn’t tell him about it? If it were to be me, I probably won’t say anything about it as well, because I wouldn’t be willing to see such a bright smile being clouded over.

There is only one true friend.

"…… He probably has a girlfriend as well, right?"

Yoshiki-san once mentioned that she was a frequent customer as well, so he should know her as well.

"I heard that she's called Hison…… Couldn't she have become Yondaime's pillar of support?"

Although Yoshiki-san's expression did not have too much of a change, it was as though I could hear the sound of an old book turning into powder after being touched with a finger.

"…… Ahh, hmm, about Hison……" Yoshiki-san's voice sounded slightly rigid. "She couldn't help it. Although she could help out a bit with their daily lives, she wasn't a reliable person, and it felt like she was somewhat unconcerned as well, and couldn't even handle her own matters. Besides…… She isn't here anymore."

I bit my lip. Perhaps that wasn't a question that I should ask. It seemed like I made him recall something sorrowful.

If so, was Yondaime always alone? Faces of Tetsu-senpai, Hiro-san, Major, Min-san, Alice and others surfaced in my mind, but it doesn't feel quite the same. Although they won't rely on Yondaime, they won't become his supporting pillar as well.

Because he's just too tough. Yondaime is just too tough, and can handle anything by himself.

"That's why Narumi-kun, you must do your best!"

"Erm…… What must I do my best for?"

"Do your best to be Hina's sworn brother."

"Isn't that a thing that can't be done by just doing one's best? I don't know what to do at all."

Right now, I can't even find a topic to talk to him about, and I almost can't believe in it now……. Believing in the thing that

should exist between Yondaime and Renji-san up till now.

“Perhaps you can try practicing manzai with him?”

“Um, that shouldn’t be so, right?”

As I was about to be pulled back to reality by my real troubles, Yoshiki-san forced the topic to another direction. How tiring.

“So Narumi-kun will of course be the side doing tsukkomis, right?”

What do you mean of course! Although I’m a bit self-conscious that it’s like this……

“Hina spoke in Kansai slang in the past as well, so he can probably act as the boke? And your group’s name would be ‘NaruHina Brothers’.”

“Why are you giving us such a cute name!? Please don’t joke anymore, I’m full just hearing the name—“

Just at that moment, my words were completely absorbed by the air and stopped.

Yoshiki-san shook his head before me. It seemed like he asked me something, but his voice couldn’t reach my ears at all.

Words.

The answer that was suddenly grasped.

Although it cannot be seen with the eyes, it’s something that is more important than anything else.

I stood up, tripping the round stool along the way. Yoshiki-san and the customers in the shop got a shock and looked back at me, but I didn’t have the time to care about them.

“E- Excuse me…… I’m very sorry, but I have to make a call!”

I rushed to the dark stairway behind the counter and hurriedly pressed the buttons after picking up my phone. The repetitive dial

tone kept ringing in my ears. The call hasn't gotten through? Is it because I'm calling, so you're deliberately pretending not to see, and not to pick up? Please, hurry up and pick up the phone!

If I don't speak it out, nothing can be expressed. I must express this in words, or we will only be lone shadows in a dark fog far away for eternity. So— Please pick up the phone. As long as this answer can be expressed, no matter what blades you use to carve your own emotions, I will accept it openly. So right now—

The dialing tone stopped in a flash.

'What?'

Yondaime's voice came from the receiver. Up to a hundred words clambered up my throat in one go, causing me to be unable to speak.

I could only tightly hold my phone while squatting on the floor that was full of dust, pressing my chest while breathing in deeply repeatedly at the same time.

'Hello? Hurry up and speak if you have anything to say! I have to go apologize to the sponsors after this.'

I frantically suppressed my charred emotions that was about to spill out.

"…… I went to see Renji-san today again."

'I already saw your message just now. So what? It's not like we found their hideout. Just now, I called my men to the sports shop at Ikebukuro just now, but they're not there anymore. Then there's no reason I should listen to yo—'

"Can you please listen to me first!"

The vibrations of my loud roar spread to my abdomen, giving me no choice but to support myself on the floor with my palm.

“Renji-san— *He’s still speaking in Kansai slang up till now*.”

No response could be heard for quite some time, but I know— I know very clearly, that’s the answer. Alice once said, words are like a sword, and I truly felt the blade of the sword sinking in my blood. The thing that Yondaime and Renji-san exchanged when they

shared sake, the important thing that can't be seen— Those are words. The two gave the words that they use from the time they were given birth to the other—

And they're keeping it up till now.

It's true for Renji-san, and the same for Yondaime as well.

So……

'So what?'

The voice of the wild wolf that answered after some effort sounded somewhat shaken.

'It's just a lame game.'

As I recall, Renji-san spoke in standard Japanese when giving orders on his phone, but he spoke in a strange Kansai slang when he talked to me, as though he was showing off photos in a photo album. Perhaps it's something that can only be shown to friends…… A true thing?

"That person……" I chose my words carefully, and squeezed out my voice from my scorching throat. "…… told me this. No matter how many years he continues to live, he cannot make a friend more important than that guy— But he has no other choice but to do in that person that gave him such a feeling. He's just hired by someone, and doesn't really want to do this, that person actually doesn't want to fight with y—"

'Shut up!'

The words that were squeezed after some effort stemmed the flow of words gushing out from the depths of my throat.

'So what about it! Then what do you think we should do? In truth, he is now my enemy, and I can only actively try to break him—'

"Please give Alice a request!"

I stood up and shouted out my thoughts.

“This is definitely wrong! Even though you’re friends and you’ve reunited after so long, up till now…… The two of you haven’t forgotten about the most important thing! Healthily…… Living on…… As long as you’re still alive.” It was as though my overheated voice was about to sink into the damp flames climbing up my windpipe. “As long as you’re still alive, you can communicate with each other, but why— why are the two sides bruising each other from head till toe?”

’What do you kno—’

“I don’t know anything, but it’s the same for Yondaime and Renji-san! Definitely having lies somewhere around, having unfortunate coincidence, so our…… our relationship wouldn’t have dissolved so easily…… If so!”

Beads of particles scattered in the darkness along with each word and sentence that I spat out, and I realized that I already couldn’t hold back my tears anymore. Even so, I still struggled to speak out the thawing words:

“Please give Alice a request!”

Steaming breath fell onto the filthy floor.

Detectives— exist just for these times.

I closed my eyes, holding my phone that was almost melted by sweat while pressing my aching side abdomen. I awaited the answer.

The words— Were they successfully transmitted? To where?

Are there only clips of emotions that have long died due to being cut, left at the place that they are transmitted to? Because I arrived too late? Even though I was always between them…… Even though I could have told them even more even earlier……

’You just need to finish your own work.’

Yondaime’s sharp but weak voice sounded like flattened aluminum foil. *’You’re just too nosy. Don’t be so alike your employer only in these*

places.'

After hanging up, I still squatted at the stairway, staring at the cellphone in my palm. The fragments of myself that couldn't be transmitted still seemed to tangle up my fingers, making me feel bouts of pain. Sweat dripped onto the dust time after time, but I still felt cold.

Sounds of metallic friction suddenly flashed past my neck. The door was opened. I slowly raised my face and saw Yoshiki-san before me.

"Are you okay?"

My voice had already turned hoarse, so I could only nod in response.

"Renji….. He's back?"

I couldn't answer the following question.

"Sorry. I didn't have any intention of eavesdropping, I just heard it on coincidence."

As I was about to stand up, I suddenly forgot how to apply force with my feet, and could only hug my knees and pull them close to my chest. I even felt as though I might even have difficulties in breathing if I don't contract my body.

Even so, I still forced myself to stand up and look back when Yoshiki-san walked away from the door and towards me step after step by leaning against the wall.

"You can't even walk?"

"It's not like I'm completely unable to, walking slowly is not a problem. The main point is about Renji."

I really couldn't meet Yoshiki-san's gaze as he reached my side.

"Hina seems to be somewhat grumpy recently, so it's because of this? So it's not just because he's busy with his event organization?"

So Yondaime never mentioned anything to this person. Because he didn't want him to worry.

So I squeezed out a smile with all of my might and shook my head in denial. But how should I justify myself? I was already lacking energy, and couldn't even think of a harmless lie anymore.

"…… Renji-san, has returned."

I could only speak of the truth.

"They didn't make peace with each other because of the matter before this. After all, both of them are stubborn people."

"That's……. True."

"It seems like there's nothing to do anymore. If so, at least—"

At least— What? What should I do? Follow what Yondaime said and do my own job?

It seems like there's only this step to take now.

I supported Yoshiki-san back into the shop. The cold wind dried my sweat. Yoshiki-san still seemed like he had something to say when he sat back onto his chair, but I immediately asked:

"About when will the design of the T-shirt picture be done? Is it possible to be done by today? Please send it to me in psd format, and then…… We'll have to send it to Alan Garba. I'll use it directly on the shop website and pop out ads. As for the fees—"

I tried to pretend that I didn't see his sincere gaze, and continued the topic of work.

If not, I would definitely forget how to speak, directly burying myself into the gentle atmosphere of silk and wool.

*

After the discussion ended, it was already four in the afternoon

when I returned to Hanamaru Ramen by taking the subway from Kita-Senju. Along the way when walking back from the station, I reported the results to Mika-san through phone, and in the end, my remaining vigor was drained by the woman that was as energetic as a high school girl.

When I finally saw the portiere of Hanamaru Ramen that looked like a mirage at the end of the alley through the heat given off by the asphalt road, I suddenly felt like crying.

It seemed like I turned fragile. After frequenting the shop, I turned more fragile than before. Just like a block of dried up brick that fell into the water, absorbing a lot of water.

But I don't regret it, because it's the same fact that there aren't any hearts in this world that can't be broken.

However, I really wish that I could be stronger, at least to the extent that I don't need to keep walking with my head lowered. While thinking of such matters, I was attracted by faint sounds of conversation, and continued to walk forward while stepping on the asphalt road that seemed to be sticking onto my feet as it melted. After that, I heard the sounds of conversation even clearly.

"I want cards of both wool and malt! Who can give that to me?"

"I can provide it if it's just malt."

"If steel ore can count as a thousand yen, I'll provide both."

"It's too expensive!"

"Then let's use five hundred yen in cash, and I'll provide malt only."

"What are you doing……?"

As usual, I looked in the back alley behind the kitchen backdoor. Tetsu-senpai, Hiro-san and Major were passionately playing a game around a wooden stand, and didn't even give me a glance. There was a board full of hexagonal blocks, colorful cards and wooden pieces on the stand. This should have been a board game that I'm quite familiar with……

“Isn’t it clear in a glance? It’s The Settlers of Catan.”

Major answered me in a somewhat scornful tone and confirmed the wad of cash by his hand. The Settlers of Catan is the most famous board game in Germany, and was brought into Japan as well—But……

“As I recall, this game doesn’t use cash, right?”

“This is a way of playing that we thought of, and it’s called Cash Catan. What differs from the normal way of playing is that cards can be traded in cash. “…… Won’t Germans be angry if they see this?”

“There will be an extreme struggle in our hearts when comparing the cash obtained after winning and the cash paid when doing deals in the game, so this is a game that requires intelligence.”

“There won’t be any driving force to play if money isn’t involved.”

“Tetsu, you wasted Major’s explanation!” Hiro-san smiled while standing up, giving me the seat of the gas tank. “Well then, Narumi-kun, why don’t you join and let us start again?”

“That’s too devious, Hiro-san! Just getting cash with deals, but not even building one street!”

“Then why don’t we let Narumi join directly? Hurry up and place two cities and streets somewhere you like. And there’s an entrance fee of two thousand yen.”

“That’s a fine idea. Indeed, The Settlers of Catan is more enjoyable with four people.”

“Fine my foot! Doesn’t that mean that only I have a setback, and am in a bad position?”

“Then we’ll give you an advantage. Only Narumi can throw five dice at once.”

“That isn’t an advantage at all!”

Hiro-san laughed out loud. The rules of the game state that we can gain crops from the boxes that we stop at, so it isn't much of an advantage.

"It is fine even if you join halfway through, Narumi. Just play. I shall support you and provide you with the funds."

"—Why is even Alice over here?"

But there's some problem with me as I didn't notice her here at all. The kitchen backdoor was about half open, and a black-haired silhouette donning light blue pajamas stood in the middle of it. Alice pressed an ice pack on her forehead and her thighs, and looked as though she returned from going somewhere to put a curse on someone. Why must she force herself to stay in the stiflingly hot ramen shop?

"Master said that she is making ice cream puffs, which is why I am waiting here. Eating ice cream puffs is all about experiencing the taste of crispy cream puff that is just done and the feeling of the ice cream slowly melting inside! Unfortunately, it is eternally impossible for me to experience the said taste if I stay in the office, so that is why I am tolerating the scorching heat over here. Despite the fact that I requested to join their ranks of playing the game, these people actually excluded me from them."

"Because Alice's financial status is a far cry from ours!" Hiro-san consoled her. "If you buy away all the resources each time in the end, we definitely can't win."

"So that is why we are having a compromise, asking the stupid Narumi to be my representative, and having the handicap of joining in midway as well. Let's go, let's go!"

To be frank, I wasn't in the mood to play games at all, but I was still forced to sit down and pick up the dice in the end. Alice gave me a huge scolding behind me, saying that I'm untalented, have no observation powers, and no negotiation ability; and was forced to see Ayaka rolling her eyes, having my crops cards taken by Hiro-san because of his negotiation, being beaten up by Major with special cards, and even being forced by Hiro-san to lend money to him with

the stupid reason of *'Forget about the game, just lend me some money'* that was completely unrelated to the game—

In the end, Min-san served us a whole hill of soft cream puffs on a tray along with a punch on each person's head, warning us not to gamble too much as well. After the hands of unequal sizes were extended to the tray, the hill of cream puffs disappeared without a trace in a flash. Being surrounded by vanilla ice cream that gave a refreshing sense of coldness, hot wind with the fragrance of chicken soup from the kitchen, and chatter of the strangely bright NEETs, I experienced a pain differing from the usual sweetness of wounds, and nearly forgot about the strong emotions burning in my heart, and the feelings when I shouted at Yondaime through the phone.

However, silence suddenly descended. Between I, who stared at the cards and wooden pieces on the stand, and my companions, who stared at me, a time that seemed to have difference in temperature passed, and there was a rustling similar to someone crying.

The sounds of the water used by Ayaka to clean the pots in the kitchen and Min-san cutting onions or celery came from the kitchen.

Just at that moment, thoughts formed in a slow speed that almost made people lose their senses.

"…… I failed."

The first, and the most useless statement.

Unknowingly, Alice placed a chair away from the kitchen backdoor at a position near to me and sat down while hugging her knees. Her direct gaze assisted me in squeezing out the words.

"I've said everything I can…… Both to Renji-san and to Yondaime, but it's useless. I think Yondaime probably wants to finish everything by himself. I really can't see how they're enemies, and even think that they're still friends, so…… If it's Alice…… If only he would give Alice a request. I kept thinking about this, and said a lot of useless stuff in the end. Is it possible— All of this are just my delusions?"

Nobody present could give me an answer, while my words were gradually buried by the humid air.

“Having once played a game of yakuzas, and having owed each other favors, and having asked me to work for him, I even thought…… I understood Yondaime a bit more. In the end, I just did a lot of meaningless stuff, and dragged him down…… I don’t actually know anything at all.”

“That’s true.”

The detective covered me with her gentle voice.

“You don’t know the person called Hinamura Souichirou at all.”

As I was about to crush signs of tears with my eyelids, Alice’s hands came in contact with my arm.

“That person is not such a low person. *He will definitely return things that he keeps for the others,* look.”

Alice’s chilly fingers sank into my skin. I suddenly heard faint sounds of footsteps coming from afar and raised my head.

The setting sun inserted in the alley brought a long shadow to my toes.

Tetsu-senpai turned around and shrugged, Major smiled wryly and pushed his goggles up, while Hiro-san stood up, carrying Alice along with her chair, making space for one person.

While I— I just stared blankly at the gray hair, sharp gaze of a wild wolf, and the shoulder with the picture of a swallowtail butterfly sewn on it.

“…… Why are all of you glaring at me?”

Yondaime said while stepping on the soil of the back alley. He just glanced at me, shifting his gaze to the NEET detective by my side immediately after.

“Why are even you over here?”

“I am a NEET detective who has nothing worth complimenting, so I do not need a reason to participate in parties.”

Yondaime snorted at Alice’s answer.

“I'm here to give you a request.”

“What a joyous event. I am happy to interrupt the party to listen to your emotionless explanation.”

I couldn’t even suppress the trembling of my knees. Yondaime gave the detective a request:

“An old friend returned. Because of timing, we can’t even talk to each other properly. But I still owe him something, and he has something to return to me as well.”

When I heard Yondaime’s words, I unconsciously held Alice’s hand. I needed something to hold on.

“As for the way, I’ll leave that for you to handle…… Just think of a way to bring him to see me.”

My throat was full of the impulse to speak.

Even so, the detective still added the last words.

“I am a NEET detective, the messenger of the deceased. My hands might destroy the tranquility based on ‘ignorance’. “

My hands temporarily recovered its grip.

“—Are you fine with that even so?”

Yondaime shifted his gaze in embarrassment.

“I’d be lying if I’m fine with that. Don’t investigate meaningless matters. I’m telling you to think of a way to stop him and to bring him before me without killing him.”

Alice sighed.

“Although I have received up to a hundred types of requests, only

you dare to deny my question in face."

"So what? Who cares about your sickly curiosity?"

"So that means you are asking me to preserve the cruel misunderstanding without touching it?"

"That isn't your job. I'll decide what to do myself."

My tightly gripped hand was trembling non-stop.

"If so, Renji-san would still hate Yondaime—"

"You shut up!" "Narumi, please shut your mouth!"

The words that the both of them spoke at the same time pierced into my chest, and I could only stop.

"However…… Yondaime, we shall dig open graves, digging out the words of the dead. If the person in the coffin is still alive, I am afraid that our pickaxes cannot harm them. And we will be stained with their blood as well. It is an unavoidable fact."

We gazed silently with bated breath, while Alice just looked directly at Yondaime.

"Do you understand what I mean?"

Yondaime glared furiously at Alice while gritting his teeth.

Would he cancel the request because of that? My heart was filled with uneasiness. Even though……. Even though we came in contact after so much effort.

However, the trace of anger in Yondaime's eyes suddenly disappeared on the next second.

"…… Whatever. Anyway, if you dare to investigate things that have passed, I'll beat people up."

"In my whole detective career, it is the first time I met such an uncooperative client."

In contrast with her words, Alice showed a relieved smile.

“Very well, I accept.”

Alice jumped down from the chair, and her black, silky hair fluttered because of that. As for me, I puffed out the air that I held in for a long time. We can finally take action. For Yondaime…… I couldn’t sit still just thinking of that, so I stood up.

However, I was not the only one to await the sign of confirmation. Major stood up first and opened the backpack by his side, taking out a stack of papers with photos attached to them and forcefully threw them at the game board.

“I predicted that such a thing might happen, so I already installed spying cameras and bugs at Renji’s hideout. But he doesn’t stay at the same place, so I couldn’t grasp his movements completely. I’ve already finished doing Ikebukuro.”

Yondaime seemed to be slightly surprised, while I think I probably had a similar expression on me as well.

“…… Ikebukuro? So you weren’t there for a survival game?”

“Hmm? Of course, I installed them along the way in the battle, and I used the support of my men as well. Installing a large amount of spying devices while wearing normal clothing would definitely be suspected, but it won’t be so if one wears camouflage clothing and is geared for battle.”

“Won’t people be more suspicious because of that?”

As I was about to do such a tsukkomi, Tetsu-senpai opened up a grubby notebook on the wooden stand.

“This is the incident in Akasaka, and this is the incident in Ueno. According to the investigations of the police, the fire was probably just a concurrent event, as the people actually damaged the power distribution box only. The police is quite troubled as well, as the people who can’t get together at normal times actually cooperated under Renji’s command, and they don’t know their true motives as well.”

Yondaime and I looked at Tetsu-senpai with bated breath at the same time.

“However, the one supporting Renji has already been confirmed. That idiot, he owed the loan sharks operated by the yakuza at Chiba quite a few million, and he was transferred to Yanagihara-kai. It’s unmistakable that the organization supporting him is Yanagihara-kai.

So he looked for loan sharks and the police because of this? And he actually put up an act before this like he didn’t want to get involved when we didn’t get a request.

“And also, I’ve already known which shops Renji often goes to.”

Even Hiro-san said such things and showed the names of shops recorded in his phone to Alice. I could only stare at the things occurring before me.

“I heard that Renji’s underlings are the delinquents near Ikebukuro, right? A girl that I know searched for a bit and found it. She knows about the sports goods store, and found out from quite a few people about sightings of Renji. If so, we can probably find out who’s assisting Renji, right?”

I looked at the faces of the three, but since Major and Tetsu-senpai gave me somewhat triumphant gazes, I couldn’t continue to look.

How could I have forgotten? How could I have thought that they were just waiting at the back alley without doing anything? Even though I came in contact with this for so many, so many times—When in need, the flourishing vigor that called one to stand up.

Why…… couldn’t I have believed in them?

“…… You guys……”

Yondaime looked somewhat bitter. Perhaps because he didn’t want people to see his expression, he extended his head into the kitchen.

“Oi, Master, can I order something?”

“I’m doing the preparations right now, you can see at a glance! You’ll have to wait for some time for the water to boil as well.”

“Doesn’t matter, it’s fine as long as there’s sake. Anyway, the ramen here is— It hurts! Why are you hitting customers?”

“Guys who don’t order don't count as customers!”

“In any case, just hurry up and get us some sake. My treat.”

Five cheap glasses with brewed sake were served, and a can of Dr. Pepper as well.

This is a place that exists for us. In the past, it was probably a gentle place that existed for another person as well.

Such a thing will never disappear, but people can get lost. I firmly believed in that. Thus, we raised our glasses in toast and drank. Smoke arose. It wasn’t to signal a battle that was starting— But to give that person at a place far away a chance to find this place.

1. ↑ In Japanese, the pronunciation of spinach is the same as ‘Report’, ‘Contact’ and ‘Communication’.

Chapter 5

Even though I hadn't come here ever since spring break, I still stopped subconsciously in nostalgia as I saw the entrance of the aggregative apartment that had a sign with Hello Palace written on it. It felt like the incident that time happened two years ago already.

It was the first case I came in contact with after officially becoming Alice's assistant, and even developed into an incident when we clashed severely with a yakuza organization— a case related to money laundry. The stage of the incident was the apartment before my eyes. However, never would I have thought that I would still have a chance to visit again.

I took out my phone to reaffirm the time. Five in the evening. Same as the time that we agreed on. Although the scorching heat of the afternoon still remained in the roots of the trees in the streets, the connection point of the pavement railings and inside the cavities on the asphalt road, it was quite cool in the shadow formed by the rectangular, four-storey building.

Even so, quite a large amount of courage was needed for me to step into the entrance of the building. After all, the one that I am planning to meet is—

"— Mr. Assistant!?"

All of a sudden, a girl's voice rang behind me, making me turn around after getting startled. Before my eyes, there was a girl whose eyes were widened and hair was tied into three locks. With an extremely tight fitting T-shirt with short sleeves and long hot pants, her coffee colored skin that radiated a sense of health felt unbearably dazzling.

"Meo?"

"Mr. Assistant, it's been a while! How are you how are you?"

Meo ran over and hugged my arm. As usual, she was a girl full of energy when doing anything and was unguarded from head to toe. This girl whose name is ‘cat’ would be the client in the incident during spring break.

“Are you here to see Meo?”

“Ah…… No……” The current me can’t look at her sincere gaze directly, and thus averted my gaze. “Actually…… I’m here to see your father.”

“Ehhhh—!?”

Please don’t prance all around while holding on to me, my shoulder is going to be torn off soon.

“Then it’s almost the same as coming here to see Meo!”

I wish quite a lot that she could share with me a tenth of her optimism. But not more than a tenth.

“But what are seeing Papa for? Is there anything wrong? Perhaps it’s that? ‘Please allow me to marry your daughter!’ or the like?”

“What are you talking about? That’s not it!”

Meo’s father— the ex-yakuza that I saved with my bluffs and deception, Kusakabe Masaya.

As for the reason that I still need to deal with this person, of course it’s because of Yondaime.

“In any case, hurry up and come up! Mr. Assistant, have you eaten dinner yet? Meo is going to cook dinner. Do you want some?”

Meo happily pulled me into the doorstep. How should I get into the topic when I meet Kusakabe Masaya? While thinking of questions like this, I thought of the matters that occurred after Yondaime gave us the request.

After watching Tetsu-senpai and the others spread out to the streets as they received Alice's orders, I gave Yondaime a report, regarding the matters that I heard from Renji-san.

That person hated Yondaime because of a female called Hison, because Yondaime caused her to die as he used her as a shield, and he accepted a sum of money from the yakuza as a deal not to speak of that anymore, taking charge of the role of an accomplice who wiped out evidence of Hison's existence as well. That was what he believed in.

"Renji-san said, Yondaime admitted to it as well. But how can this be possib—"

"He's right. That time, I didn't want to die, so I hid behind Hison when the opposing party stepped into the room with a knife. And she was stabbed to death in my place."

Lies! I originally planned to shout that out, but it distorted in my throat and stopped.

"So what? It does not concern you. Didn't I tell you not to investigate irrelevant matters? You just focus on thinking how to stop Renji and how to deal with the advertisements."

Yondaime forcefully pressed his fist on my chest, giving me a warning by my ears with the voice that was like a sharp blade, and walked out after that.

When only I was left, I directly sat on the emergency backstairs. Yondaime's words and my sweat were stuck on my face.

Because he didn't want to die, he hid. A person was stabbed to death in his place.

Are you really telling me to believe in such a thing?

Although this might be a despicable action, let me propose a request to Alice about this then.

"Why do you need to know about the woman called Hison?"

Alice, who returned to her bed in the office, asked while pounding on the keyboard. She spoke in a tone that sounded somewhat deliberate, which means it was her habit of asking about something that she already knows about acting up again.

“Because Yondaime is lying.”

“Not so.”

With her back on me, Alice answered firmly.

“Think back on what occurred to Tetsu. You said that same thing as well.”

What occurred to Tetsu-senpai. In the death incident that became one of the reasons for the abolishment of the Gardening Committee, he lied that he was the one that caused someone to die—

“Which means, before you and I expose the truth, those do not count as lies at all.”

Alice’s words interrupted my thoughts.

“As you believed that those were lied, and I added some words as well, it turned into lies. In that incident— half of it should not count as the job of a detective. A type of element that only exists in humans was too firmly planted in my head.”

Alice’s voice sounded extremely heavy. Perhaps she is in repentance?

“That quality of yours is a power that I do not have. The form that you make sometimes invites more resentment. You executed the things that one cannot do as a detective in a careless manner. That is ‘story’. Although you might not notice it yourself.”

I felt a pain from my chest and pressed my fist on my ribs. Alice turned around, and her black hair fluttered as well.

Her smile was so gentle.

“However, that is fine as well. If an assistant detective does not do

something that a detective cannot do, there is no meaning for his existence. The request that you have proposed is for your friend, Hirasaka Renji, is that right?"

I suppressed my feelings of joy and apology in my heart and nodded in response. The pointer moved speedily, and a file was opened on one of the monitors.

"The Korean female called Hison had once worked at a night club called Lou Lan at Shin-Okubo. As her name is the same as a famous Korean female artiste, it seems like she directly used her own name as her nickname. The shop was once assaulted by Shura-dou that was led by Hirasaka Renji, and the case was broadcasted in the news and was recorded in the police's files as well."

"…… Why…… have you already investigated this?"

"I just found out about this."

The detective spoke as though it wasn't anything to be awed about.

"As for which part I need to investigate, I actually knew from a long, long time ago."

Facing Alice's understanding words, I couldn't help but sigh.

"As for the rest, please collect information by yourself. Fortunately, the shop is more or less connected to us."

"…… Eh?"

"This…… is a night pub where Asian women work at. You probably have an inkling now, right?"

My hand that searched in my memories seemed to have bumped into something. In surprise, I could only feel as though my jaw was about to drop.

"Here, this is Kusakabe Masaya's phone number. Hurry up and give him a call."

Kusakabe Masaya was one of the key members in a yakuza

organization in Kansai, but he got out due to his dissatisfaction of the organization's way of dealing with things. After that, he went to various countries in Asia, bringing his marriage partner back to Japan. In the process, the many females that he got to know went to Japan with his help to work, and without an alternative, Kusakabe Masaya even started a new company.

Actually, when I think about it, the extent of his popularity made me feel like Hiro-san is just a small potato. After all, a large crowd of females did indeed go overseas and followed him to Japan, so it really wasn't simple.

The last time that I saw him, since he was running away, his charisma couldn't be felt at all. However, not only did the Kusakabe Masaya that spoke to me while being separated by a table wear a flamboyant purple suit, he wouldn't give people an impression of frivolity, and he was like what Meo once said, a dangerous middle-aged man that was like a wildcat, having a trace of sweetness in wildness. He wasn't just a baddie, but a complete arch-villain.

"It's time for me to work soon, so keep things short."

The venue of our meeting was not in the place where Kusakabe Masaya and Meo lived at, but an office at the first floor of Hello Palace. I heard that Kusakabe Masaya recently started a high-class club, the job of a night owl in its entirety. I heard that he was really, really busy, so busy that we could only meet at this time before he goes to work.

"How is Hello Corporation right now?"

"The company is still present, but I let go to show my responsibility. Is this still the time for us to chat about all this?"

I contracted my neck. I wasn't too sure about what occurred after the money laundry incident, but since the apartment was still there, perhaps the matter had already passed? Or is it possible that there is just a short lag before the incident sinks?

In any case, I must focus on things that I should do.

“I’ve mentioned at the phone as well, it’s about the night club at Shin-Okubo called Lou Lan. You…… probably know about it, right?”

Kusakabe furrowed his brows slightly and nodded in response.

“It’s our system. It was under Tabara-gumi, and was taken by Gotouda-gumi after that, but it went solo quite a long time before.”

I sighed softly.

“It’s like this, right? There was a conflict with a gang consisting of juvenile delinquents, and the gang seized the shop away.”

“Why do you know—“

Kusakabe’s expression changed drastically. His gaze turned into that of a ferocious beast.

“You know the person who did that, right? The one called Hinamura.”

“Y- Yes…… Actually……”

It wasn’t called Hirasaka-gumi that time, and most of the ones who did that were probably Renji-san’s underlings, which means, Kusakabe Masaya still hadn’t found out about that up till now. The young yakuza who saved him a few months ago was actually the main culprit who seized his shop, how can this be possible……

Of course, Yondaime hadn’t realized that as well. For the money laundry, Hello Corporation and Tabara-gumi supporting it, and also the other companies related to them, had already developed into a convoluted organizational structure. If not for Alice, who searched for clues, would anyone ever find out about such a strange connection?

I heard Kusakabe cluck his tongue twice.

“…… Whatever. It already passed, and does not concern me anymore. What about Lou Lan?”

As it was a shop that he let go of long ago, I wondered if he still remembers it. Thus, I asked in a respectful tone:

“The Korean person working in the shop that time who was called Hison.”

“…… The woman who was killed?”

So he knows about it as well. Even knowing the fact that she was killed. I used my hands to lean forward while supporting the table.

“Do you know who killed her?”

“God knows! One of the underlings from Gotouda-gumi. That was why they wanted to seal people’s mouths. I only heard of this from the others.”

I forlornly lowered my head. That’s true. So that nobody would be aware of it, they had long buried this incident in the darkness, and knowing that she was murdered was already quite impressive.

“That means that Gotouda-gumi is having revenge on Yondaime in vengeance, right? Because their shop was stolen away.”

“If Hinamura was the mastermind, that should be so. But is there really a need for them to kill him?”

“I heard that Yondaime once lived with Hison-san. On the day of the incident, they were in the same room as well. Was it because Hison-san went forward by her own accord, or some kind of accident occurred? These are still not clear.”

“Why are you investigating this? Aren’t you only in high school? Do you want to die young?”

“A previous companion…… Is still in doubt. He thinks Yondaime used Hison-san as his shield.”

“You should ask Hinamura himself.”

I did that long ago. And I don’t want to remember his heartbreaking

answer right now.

“Then isn’t it as he said then?”

“He isn’t a person who would do something like this. He must be hiding something, that’s why……”

“Are you an idiot? It’s not like he’s framed by the cops, right? If it’s just an inner conflict between you, then fighting or talking it out among yourselves would solve it.”

As though all the gas in my body was let out, I collapsed on the chair and thought: ‘That’s absolutely right.’

If it could be solved by talking things out or by fighting, it would still be fine. It’ll be great if we could just drag Renji-san to the stage where Yondaime is standing on. However, it’s impossible for that to be achieved according to the current circumstances. It’s evident that Renji-san does not plan to accept the challenge head on.

If we just need to bait Renji-san out, he can actually be forcefully dragged out by using Tetsu-senpai, Major and Hiro-san’s power. But I’m hoping for Renji-san to make his own choice. Making a choice once again after knowing the truth. Would he choose to go face to face with Yondaime? Or would he choose to continue with his back to ours?

To know the truth is to face death. I recalled the words that Alice was always saying.

I am chasing this truth, and I think I still might lose someone forever. Including Yondaime, including Renji-san, and including me.

Even if that’s true, I still can’t stop.

Kusakabe Masaya stared at me at a side as I stayed silent, and snorted.

“Anyway, I’m not too sure about the related details. As I owe you a favor, I can help you to ask the people from Gotouda-gumi, but they definitely wouldn't say anything.”

“It…… Should be so, right?”

If they could simply speak of this to outsiders, they wouldn’t have needed to hide the details concerning the case with so much effort.

“And then, we’ll probably be able to find out some things if we check out the flow of the money.”

“…… Money?”

“If Gotouda-gumi really did give money to Hinamura, we can definitely find some traces even if they gave him cash. Aren’t you really good at finding out about these things?”

I nodded furiously with my jaw agape. I think my expression that time was probably quite idiotic.

I understand now. I never thought of it.

“I’ll give it a try, thank you—“

“You will have no friends.”

I was stopped by Kusakabe’s words, making me unable to speak anything.

“The so-called flow of money is the true personality of that guy. Do you really understand?”

“…… I understand.” I stared at the back of my hand. “However, if we don’t do anything, we’ll lose even our other friends.”

If we just silently waited, everything would leave to a place that can’t be touched by our hands. If so—

“You’re really a persistent fellow.”

As Kusakabe said that as well, I really couldn’t rebuke him at all.

“After this, don’t get near Meo. It’s already enough when she has one useless person like me by her side for eternity.”

“Okay……” Why did he mention Meo all of a sudden?

When Kusakabe Masaya reaffirmed the time on his watch and stood up, the sounds of the door opening rang behind me.

“Kusakabe-san, I heard that Ming Hai is here, is it true?”

When I turned around, I met the gaze of a female wearing a miniskirt.

“— Ming Hai!”

The female walked around the desk and ran to the chair by my side and sat down with a ‘thump’.

“Didn’t I tell you to see me at the shop? You never showed up at all!”

“No, well, I’m just sixteen after all……” Besides, it’s evident that your shop is a pub that one can bring the ladies out of.

The Chinese beauty is called Yi Ling-san, and she’s a pub lady who took good care of me when we investigated Kusakabe Masaya’s case. With her young appearance, most would probably believe it if she said that she’s a college student, and as I heard that she already arrived at Japan for quite some time, her Japanese is quite fluent. But for some reason, she uses Chinese intonations when calling only my name.

“I’m going to work right now, do you want to go with me?”

“Please listen to me properly, I’m just sixteen!” And please don’t grab my hand, I’ll get a fright.

“If you’re not here to accompany, then what are you here for? Ah— Is your target Meo? Why are there so many lolicons in this modern world?”

Kusakabe-san, please save me. I don’t even know how to speak so that women can understand me!

“Yi Ling, weren’t you living near Shinjuku five years ago?”

Kusakabe spoke in a low tone as he ignored my words.

“Haven’t you helped out a few times at Lou Lan of Shin-Okubo as well?”

“Yes, yes…… Eh? You aren’t telling me to help out again, are you? But is the shop still here?”

“It’s not like that, this guy has something to ask of you. Do you remember a Korean woman called Hison?”

Yi Ling-san looked at Kusakabe and I with a curious gaze and nodded slightly.

“…… Yes yes yes. She was an extreme beauty, and she’s the number one over there. I remember it clearly, and I often chatted with her as well.”

I couldn’t help but grip Yi Ling-san’s hand tightly.

“What kind of person was she?”

“What kind of person? Wasn’t Ming Hai just in primary school that time? Eh? What? What kind of relationship do you have?”

“Erm— That female called Hison— Her boyfriend is my friend.”

“Hison’s? This…… Ehhhhh!? But shouldn’t that girl’s boyfriend be Gotouda-san? Narumi, you’re an acquaintance of Gotouda-san?”

I fell into a daze with my jaw wide. What? What did she say? Gotouda?

Kusakabe Masaya stood up as well, and questioned Yi Ling-san in my place as I had already lost consciousness.

“Gotouda, does that refer to the boss?”

“…… Nnn, uh huh. Weren’t you talking about this? Hison said that she’s Gotouda’s mistress as well.”

Mistress.

The yakuza boss that originally took command of the shop, his

mistress.

Strangely, my mind started to cool down. I understand now. No wonder nothing happened between Yondaime, Renji-san and her, living together like three siblings. Do they know about this? Nono, it's impossible for them do make such an innocent promise if they knew. Or perhaps, the thing that Yondaime is hiding is this?

How would this turn out to be if this continues?

Or is it completely different from the drawing sketched in my mind? A drawing that had more unpleasant elements added, and had colors of desires mixed.

"Mr. Assistant, won't you have dinner before going?"

Meo sent me out while pulling on my sleeve.

"Oi, Meo. Don't let people that you don't know in when I'm not home." Kusakabe Masaya poked his head out of the driver's seat and cautioned her repeatedly.

"Mr. Assistant isn't a person that I don't know!" "Just be obedient."

Ignoring the squabble between the father and daughter, Yi Ling-san approached my side and said softly before sitting in the back seat of the car:

"I'll help you to ask people that I'm familiar with that time. It's just that many of them already changed shops or jobs, or even quitted and returned to their motherland, so I can't be sure about this. As I recall, a few girls should have lived in the same apartment as Hison that time, it's just that I don't know how to contact them."

"…… So sorry. I'm counting on you then."

"Let me ask you, it's a murder case, right? Wouldn't it be better if you don't meddle in cases like this?"

In the end, I had no other choice but to inform Yi Ling-san of the

news of Hison-san being stabbed to death, and as I predicted, she immediately started to worry about me.

“I’m hoping that I can do that as well.”

I think so from the bottom of my heart. Why can’t we just be normal lazy NEETs? Why couldn’t we have met at the back alley behind the ramen shop because of us fooling around?

The car that had two people on left after leaving a hint of warmness, and Meo pulled on my hand once again that moment.

“You’re really not eating before going?”

“…… Nnn, sorry.” I don’t have an appetite at all, and as her father said, doesn’t allowing me to step into the room feel a bit wrong?

“But weren’t you always staying in Miss Detective’s room?”

“Nnn— But that’s…… The detective agency office.”

Even I, myself, thought that it didn’t explain anything at all. It was indeed Alice’s bedroom, and she did indeed wear pajamas all day long. I only felt it then, should I take more note in this aspect?

“Meo is ok anytime as well!” What ok? “If you’re in a bad mood, you can come over no matter it’s my house or the restaurant I’m working at. Because I haven’t paid you back for your help.”

I couldn’t help but berate myself. Couldn’t she have answered in a more cheerful tone? But Meo was still looking at me with a smile on her face, a smile so radiant that even rays of sunlight can’t be compared with it.

“I’ll wait for you!”

Yoshiki-san did things quite quickly, and sent us T-shirt with the band logo printed on it at the start of August. Mika-san and I were called to the designer’s workroom to get the sample.

“This— is really extremely awesome! Super cool!”

The workers in the workroom started to put on the T-shirts with the band logo printed on it, including Mika-san. Even the QR code of the official website didn’t feel off on it, and was successfully fused into the Japanese pattern. It could only be said as a piece of work at the level of a master.

“Fujishima-san, how many would you need? Thirty or so? Just take it. Since your web of contacts is so wide, you can definitely distribute a lot of them.”

Nonono, I don’t have so many contacts. However, as Hiro-san requested me beforehand, I still took thirty of them gratefully.

“And this. Yoshiki-san told me to give this to you.”

After saying that, Mika-san took out another T-shirt with the logo of the band that was carefully contained in another plastic bag from another bag.

…… Wait, that doesn’t seem to be the same. Although the picture was exactly the same, this……

“Embroidery?”

I curiously opened the package and touched it to reaffirm the fact. It wasn’t printed on. Including the QR code, the surrounding picture was completely sewn on.

“Eh? W- What is this? Why is this here?”

“I heard that this is the ‘original’.”

Original?

“Yoshiki-san said that he wanted to try making an embroidered pattern, so he made this himself. He said something like it was made by editing the original design and the scan, just that I didn’t really get it.”

I was totally speechless. He actually did it till this extent? Although

he said that the picture would be more visible if the picture was sewn on. I touched the surface of the T-shirt once again. Like tatami, the embroidery was densely packed and had a sense of luster. It couldn't be imagined how long a time would be required for it to be completed.

"…… B- But, why is this here?"

"Yoshiki-san told me to hand this to you."

"Whaa—!?"

"Because this T-shirt was Fujishima-san's suggestion in the first place! Besides, you're the boss of the advertising department, so there is no person more suitable than you to wear this shirt!"

I seriously got an incomparably valuable thing, and don't really dare to wear it easily. But I can't just return it to him, so I could only accept it and walk out of the workroom. If I bid it online after the concert ends, how much money would I get, I wonder? As such an instant flashed through my mind in an instant, I should really beat myself up properly.

I speedily rode my bike back to Hanamaru Ramen. Hiro-san had already arrived before the kitchen backdoor. I immediately handed the sample T-shirts to him.

"This is quite nice. They can probably count as the first self-made T-shirts that Alan Garba released. If I tell the girls that they can get them two days earlier than the shops, they would definitely be extremely happy."

Hiro-san happily filled the colorful T-shirts in numerous plastic bags, saying that he was going to give them to girls that he knew well as additional service.

"These would probably be on a magazine next month or so, right?"

"Yes…… It turned out like that somehow."

The more surprising thing was, there was actually a request from a fashion magazine unrelated with the band for us to accept an interview. As Yoshiki-san said that he didn't want too much publicity, firmly refusing to get interviewed, Mika-san and I were thinking of a way to refuse them nicely the previous day. Although the magazine would go on sale after the concert, to increase CD sales and publicity, having such chances won't be bad. After all, it could achieve a promotional effect without having to pay, and that made me understand deeply the importance of the public media. We sent emails to news websites or magazine companies, and what's left was just to wait for them to take the bait. It seemed like we were starting to go on track.

It was still fine when my schedule was full with my job of advertising, but when I returned to the back alley after the job ended, I started to feel gloomy again. After all, not only Hiro-san, Major and Tetsu-senpai would come over most of the time as well. That day, two of them appeared after noon passed as well.

"This gang actually dissolved long ago, and seemed to have been gathered by Hirasaka. The guy who was originally their leader is currently working at a locomotives' firm, so we can ambush him when he goes home from work."

"Do we have the time to go slow and steady like this? How many people are there in the gang that you spoke of?"

Tetsu-senpai looked at Major's laptop computer while retying the bandages on his hands. It felt like Tetsu-senpai seemed to have been injured more recently.

"There are about five who go for regular gatherings. I've just heard Hirasaka's instructions, and they're probably having a meeting at the karaoke at the east pass."

"Then why don't we barge in right away? That would be quicker. Bringing them down one by one is just too tiring."

"Do we need to use shock shells?"

"Idiot, isn't that a karaoke? Someone will call the police."

“Then let’s use tear bombs. There won’t be sound nor brilliant light.”

“The problem is, there’ll be smoke!” “And tears as well……” “And snot!” “But basically, those are basically trickled down from the face, so it won’t be too dirty. Some people would even pee their pants if shock shells are used.”

The two who ended their discussion(?) stood up, and were planning to pass by me and Hiro-san’s sides. However, Tetsu-senpai seemed to have noticed that my gaze was like that of a lost lamb, so he stopped and gave me a wry smile.

“It’s not like we’re sending them all into the hospital, as we’ll need to talk to them after beating them up.”

“Really? You won’t beat them up so much that they can’t even open their mouths, will you?” Hiro-san showed a doubtful gaze.

Major took out an IC recorder, playing the contents of the so-called ‘discussion’.

’…… What? That person’s gaze is dangerous. If he just takes down his shades, you’ll think that he’ll kill you. Get it? I heard that he originally disappeared somewhere around, and was quite relieved.’

’Of course, I’m quite annoyed with Hirasaka-gumi, and we were forbidden to get in a lot of shops, so of course, there’s bad blood between us. And Hirasaka-san is quite free with his money as well. But that isn’t the problem. Anyway, that person is scary. I can only obediently do as he says. Attracting the police? But of course, wasn’t there a fire as well? But that person is scarier.’

’Ouch! Okay, okay, we won’t take action anymore. Who would want to get involved with people like you!’

The voices of quite a few men could be heard at the same time, so the situation couldn’t be clearly grasped. But It seemed like they were the people who attacked the live house at Ueno.

To make them obey him, Renji-san used money— And also, fear.

“But nobody actually said that they were beaten up by Renji.”

Tetsu-senpai spoke in a soft voice.

“In the end, it was really effective when I beat them up, and they became really submissive.”

Recently, senpai and Major’s actions really can’t be said as those of a detective squad anymore, which would be spying on the den of Renji-san’s underlings, and trying to convince (Tetsu-senpai was in charge of this part) them.

“Yondaime is currently busy with the critical stage of his official business, and those from Hirasaka-gumi are workers for the event as well, so they can’t just do as they like. That’s why they’re leaving me the good stuff.”

“If we don’t catch Hirasaka, it would have the same meaning as picking up trash, Tetsu-san.”

“Even so, we don’t know where he is, so what choice do I have? I want to have a showdown with him as well. That guy probably changed phones again, huh?”

“In the past, Hirasaka was indeed the one with the most potential to be a wanderer among us.”

The two walked out of the back alley, while I picked up the list of facilitator that Major left. Almost half of them had already been crossed off. What chilling efficiency.

However, as Hiro-san looked at the list from behind, his tone turned heavy.

“…… Since he can mobilize such a large amount of people, why didn’t he directly take action?”

I glanced upwards at Hiro-san and looked at the name list once more.

Hiro-san was absolutely right. Renji-san repeatedly instigated his underlings to undergo small hindering acts. All of the booked

venues for the concerts were assaulted in some way, and there were some where only the garbage dump was ruffled.

Yondaime, who heard the report, said in a tone full of sarcasm that it was probably just a wild dog peeing to guard its own territory. However, it was exactly for that reason that some members of the gang were put in charge of each event venue in the end, which would mean that a web of security would have to be spread for almost twenty four hours a day.

It was quite a knotty problem for Hirasaka-gumi as well, but it still returned to the previous question.

Renji-san— What is he planning to do?

If he just wants to hinder the event, there are still many other ways as well. After all, we already know that his funds are probably quite sufficient. If he just wants to lower Yondaime's credibility, there are probably more weaknesses to exploit.

Why did he only take lame actions?

"In any case, let's leave it to Alice to think of the reason. We'll just have to obediently be her hands and feet to continue investigation."

Hiro-san stood up and added:

"Ahhh, that's right. Yi Ling called for you."

"Ehegh!?"

I made a strange noise accidentally. Yi Ling-san was Hiro-san's ex-girlfriend. Since that person was always deceiving women, without exception, it isn't that happy when he breaks up with girls. I recall that Yi Ling-san told me that she should have deleted Hiro-san's number from his phone.

"She said that she got in contact with the girl living next to the woman called Hison."

When I stood up, my knees accidently banged on the corner of the wooden stand with force.

“Wa…… Wa- Wait a minute! Why did she contact Hiro-san! Why not me!”

“Probably because she still can’t let go of me?”

WHAA—! What sort of optimistic thought is that!?

“Let’s not talk about this for now. Narumi-kun, I think it’s about time you remembered the fact that you’re a high schooler, right?”

“I’ve almost forgotten about it completely.”

During the spring break, I once had the same feeling as well. Am I able to go back to my normal school life when the new semester starts? I won’t continue to live on directly in this back alley, would I?

“In any case, this is a killing incident related to the yakuza, so you shouldn’t poke your nose into this so much, Narumi-kun. It’s dangerous. Actually wanting to fish out such profound things out of a girl that you met for the first time, that’s my job, of course.”

I sat down, heaving a long sigh on my knees. Hiro-san was right. Perhaps Yi Ling-san handed the matter to Hiro-san because of worry that I would get in trouble?

“Narumi-kun, you did well, so it’s fine.”

Hiro-san’s unexpectedly forceful hand came in contact with my shoulder.

“The event seems to be getting more heated as well. Didn’t Mii-chan praise you as well?”

“However, no matter how heated it is, if a bomb falls, everything would be destroyed.”

Since I already met Renji-san for three times, perhaps……. I am able to do more?

“Regarding these parts, you don’t need to be so similar to Alice.”

Hiro-san laughed at me from the bottom of his heart.

“Similar…… to Alice?”

“Thinking that everything is her fault, she said that she would feel more easy like that. Actually, what truly requires courage is to allow someone to keep custody of something.”

Hiro-san explained with a gentle gaze, making me feel as though I fell to the bottom of the ground.

When Hiro-san left the kitchen backdoor, I sat alone on the old tires, pondering while listening to the weak cicada cries. Staying here alone won’t do any good. Right now, Renji-san and I have a point of connection. I can only mull over this myself.

When I was in deep thought with my head lowered, Min-san poked her face out of the kitchen backdoor.

“Oi, Narumi. Alice’s lunch is done. Chinese cold noodles without noodles, egg and ham. Get it to her, please.”

I thought, what would be left if so much has been taken out? In the end, I saw that there were just small pieces of cucumbers floating in the cold soup. What kind of dish is this!? I’m already feeling downcast, so can you not ask me to deliver this kind of thing? Just looking at it made me unhappy.

“I have already found out about the personal money and movements in a few accounts belonging to the leader of Gotouda-gumi.”

Alice explained while munching on cucumbers on her bed. Numbers were densely packed on the monitors behind her.

“A sum of money obtained by the shop manager each month was stopped along with Hison’s disappearance. Although it might just be an outsider’s testimony, she might indeed be the mistress of the male party.”

“Nnn……”

“And on the month that Hison vanished, there was an unknown expense of twenty million yen.”

I felt chilled and recalled Kusakabe Masaya’s words. The flow of money is the true nature of mankind. It is indeed so. When the NEET detective gets involved, everything will be exposed under the sun.

“Among this, ten million yen was for a doctor.”

“…… Doctor?”

“The identity of the doctor was easily found out— A surgeon Gotouda-gumi is particularly fond of using. Probably because they tried to cure Hison? It is possible that the fees were used to shut his mouth, or as the fees to take care of the corpse…… But the regretful thing is, that doctor was already quite old that time, and has currently passed away.”

I swallowed the saliva in my mouth after some effort.

“The other ten million was deposited to a real estate agent at the Adachi district.”

“…… Real estate?”

“And the said agent was a scoundrel working with Yondaime as well.”

As I recall, Pole seemed to have mentioned something similar as well. When Gotouda-gumi that was in charge was chased out, Yondaime once worked together with a real estate agent to do something on the rights of the building and land.

“So the ten million yen was to let Yondaime shut up?”

“There is such a possibility, because Yondaime should not have had a proper bank account at that time.”

I sighed, and took out a can of Dr. Pepper from the fridge.

So he really did accept such a sum of money? If the flow of money is properly proven, it seems like he doesn't have a choice but to admit it.

Yondaime's— true nature.

"Allow me to confirm this once more. These are probably Hirasaka Renji's thoughts, correct? A member of Gotouda-gumi infiltrated Yondaime's apartment just to kill him, but because Hison, as the person living together, wanted to protect Yondaime, or he used her as a shield, in any case, she was mistakenly killed. After that, Yondaime accepted a sum of money, and treated it as though the woman called Hison did not exist from the start."

I felt an ache in my heart and nodded in response. However, Alice, who finished her Dr. Pepper in one go, spoke with her eyes narrowed.

"I am already unlike you, who use the intangible thing known as 'virtue and righteousness' as a foothold to judge Yondaime. However, my conclusion is the same as yours. There seems to be something off with this case, a point of uncertainty."

"…… Eh?"

"Pray tell, why did Gotouda-gumi not kill Yondaime directly?"

I looked at the detective's cold, expressionless face. The meaning of those words slowly seeped into my skin along with the cold wind.

That's right. It's indeed strange.

Because of Hirasaka-gumi that was led by Yondaime, Gotouda-gumi lost the protection racket of the night club Lou Lan. Besides, Yondaime was the secret lover of the said organization's leader, so it isn't strange even if he was targeted. That was what I originally thought.

If so, why did they allow Yondaime to live— Even giving him the sum of money?

"…… The matter of wanting to kill Yondaime, perhaps it was just

an action taken without permission, and wasn't instructed by Gotouda-gumi?"

"Is there a need to use up tens of millions to help such an underling? Even if they were just trying to protect the name of the organization, there should have been other ways."

That's true. It was even more unreasonable than the reason of the organization wanting to kill Yondaime in the first place.

"I think…… Probably, the former basis of the hypothesis was wrong."

"…… Which part?"

I asked while thinking.

If Yondaime and Gotouda-gumi weren't enemies from the start—won't that be more logical?

However…… IS that possible? If so, there's even less of a reason for Yondaime to be killed.

"It cannot be known right now, but it is possible that everything is correct as well. In any case, we can only wait for the news found out by Hiro."

Alice's mutterings were like the remains of plankton, accumulated below frozen air.

"If this is done to hide a certain lie, the truth hidden below will definitely be even worse than the current situation."

*

It was already a week after when Hiro-san returned to Hanamaru Ramen. That time, Major and I were analyzing a large quantity of surveillance records behind the kitchen backdoor.

"How's the situation? I asked for some ice cream from Min-san."

From Hiro-san's tone as he walked into the shade from the sun, I perceived an unnatural sense of unhappiness. Major might have noticed it as well.

Even when I took the cup with the vanilla ice cream from Hiro-san, he didn't seem happy at all.

"Currently, we've closed down on five places where Hirasaka might be staying at."

A rigid, business-like tone.

"We couldn't grasp the location he's staying at. If we know his phone number, it'll be okay when we check it out through the GPS, but it seems like he changed phones again, and would often turn off his phone as well."

"He doesn't already know that Alice can locate him by tracking his phone signal, does he?"

Major sighed.

"It's possible as well. After all, we're almost too invincible in this city, and are too famous. If anyone tells Hirasaka that we have overwhelming skills, it won't be strange."

Regarding Alice's detective skills, most of the weight was placed on phones, an item that is filled with important personal information. When she is facing an opponent whose phone signal can't be detected, she's actually not that great.

"Besides, Hirasaka and co. hasn't taken action since August. Both preemptive and follow up attacks were put on hold."

"Might they be planning to make trouble on the day of the concert itself?"

"There's a possibility. We can't loosen our guard— In any case, the people in Hirasaka-gumi basically don't have anything to do as well, so it probably doesn't matter. But speaking of which, what has Hiro-san got?"

“Ahh, yes.”

Hiro-san approached the wooden stand, taking out a silver object from his pocket. It was an IC recorder. As Major was in charge of modifying it, its reception was excellent. One of the must-have tools of the NEET Detective Squad.

However, Hiro seemed to be hesitating if he should hand the recorder to Major. He stood blankly by my side while staring at the recorder on his palm.

I thought, so even this person can show a look of sadness when he sees something?

“So you’re letting us listen to this before Alice?”

Major asked. Hiro-san finally nodded.

“Nnn. I hope that you can listen to it first, and then decide if we’re really going to let Alice listen— Ah, no. Of course, we’re definitely letting her listen, but anyway……”

Hiro-san stammered. Major nodded silently, connecting the recorder to his laptop computer. Sounds came from the speaker, and sounded like aches that spread to the eyelids when one takes an injection.

’…… Say, so you’re really not from the organization?’

It was the voice of a woman that sounded rather exhausted. The both of us glanced at Hiro-san.

“It’s the person who lived by Hison before this. I searched for her for a whole week. She’s an ordinary salarywoman right now.”

I swallowed. He found her? According to Yi Ling-san, she was the person who lived by the room where the incident occurred.

’They told me that I absolutely can’t speak of this…… Eh? N- No! Not to the company! Don’t tell them, f- fine, I’ll tell you.’

“…… I was slightly anxious as well. I’m quite sorry for that.”

Hiro-san smiled wryly. Such threats shouldn't be those of a gigolo.

'But I know next to nothing. I was sleeping that time…… Yes. It was some time before work, in the evening.'

Hiro-san's questioning voice could be faintly heard.

— You worked in the same night club as Hison, right?

'Yeah…… But Hison was almost fired that time.'

— Why?

'She said that she was going to ask for a month's leave because of her body. She probably lied. As the shop owner asked me to check it out, but I didn't see any tampons in the trash, but it was probably true that she was sick. It looked like her hip hurt so much that she couldn't stand.'

— Is it because of illness?

'I don't know. I heard that she almost couldn't walk, and a guy would occasionally go to take care of her.'

— Did that person have his hair bleached white?

'Nnn, that's right. Do you know him? …… Sorry, I won't ask anymore …… Hmm, that guy seemed to have came that day as well. All of a sudden, a huge noise came from the next room, and a girl's scream could be heard…… A car came immediately, including a few men in black that I once saw. I sneaked a peek through a small slit through the door, and I saw Hison being hauled away while being covered in blood. The knife was directly stabbed in her stomach. According to the men in black, the blood wouldn't stop if it's pulled out.'

I subconsciously tightened my grip on the edge of the gas tank so that I won't just collapse.

'And there's the guy as well. His shoulders kept bleeding…… Yes…… The person who stabbed him? Hmm, I didn't see it, but I might not be able to keep my life if I saw him….. Yes. Nnn.'

— Apart from Hison's scream, did you hear other people's voices?

I felt that Hiro-san's questioning voice was getting weaker.

"Eh? …… Nope, it wasn't Hison. That wasn't Hison's voice."

I widened my eyes, and shifted my gaze to Major and Hiro-san's faces.

'It was another woman's voice. Saying something like 'I won't forgive you, I'll kill you, you thief' and the like.'

Woman.

The person who stabbed her was a woman?

The recorder finally stopped, while a heaviness that caused us to be unable to move even a finger filled the valley formed by the buildings.

Three people could listen to the details of the death that was recorded. Is this a good thing? Major took action first. He moved the data from the recorder to his computer, and returned the silver recorder to Hiro-san after ejecting it. After taking it, Hiro-san stood up while exposing hesitant looks for a few times, walking towards the emergency backstairs after that.

On the other hand, I sat on the gas tank, and was unable to move.

It felt as though Hiro-san's footsteps were extremely far from me. Major put on his earphones once again and started to type. It seemed like a hole was opened somewhere, and warm water flowed out. However, the desert was still boundless, and we must still continue to walk on. Thus, I was shrouded in a strange feeling.

I stood up. It seemed like Major called me, but I flung the voice away, dashing out from the gap between the buildings. The glaring sunlight of August shone in my eyes. My whole body was sweating, while what stuck onto my neck area was the voice of the woman recorded in the recorder.

I moved my bike parked at a corner of the charged parking lot to the road, forcefully kicking up the stand. Each time I stepped on the pedals, the voice of the woman was swallowed by the choppy wind,

and gradually moved further.

In the Hirasaka-gumi office, only Yondaime was left. It was the first time I saw that there wasn't even one person on the sofa separated by a desk. As people were put in charge of guarding the five pre-booked concert venues, there wasn't any spare manpower to chill out at the office.

Yondaime was battling with a stack of bills, and just glanced at me when I entered the room. When our gazes met, I couldn't help but lower my head.

"…… Sorry for coming here without permission."

"You're one of our own, and you have the key as well, so what about permission? Don't you have an appointment for a news interview today as well?"

"Ah, I already handed that to Mika-san."

"Then you can take a rest for two or three days. Renji isn't moving right now as well, so only Major and Alice can find his den. You're on a daily salary, so you can just take breaks when you can."

"Yondaime, you're really stubborn regarding money."

"I was raised by cheapskate parents, after all."

How was he raised to form such a materialistic person with a twisted personality?

I closed my eyes, tightly gripping the sweat in my palms and raised my head again, moving to Yondaime's side after walking around the sofa and the desk. As he usually dons a webbed vest with his shoulders bare, the tattoo of the emblem on his arm could be clearly seen.

I unconsciously extended my hand to touch it. Yondaime shifted his gaze from the bills to me.

“Have a problem?”

When I silently touched the emblem, Yondaime stood up and flung my hand away. My hand that was flung away felt a slight pain.

However, my fingers did indeed feel it. A scar. A deep scar covered by the tattoo.

“Why you—“

Although my collar was gripped, I looked directly into Yondaime’s eyes filled with anger.

“So the one who was supposed to be stabbed wasn’t Yondaime.”

In the eyes of the wild wolf, flames of fury continued to burn, and changed into scorching charcoal.

“What are you trying to say!?”

“Hiro-san went to see a girl that seemed to have lived next to Hison-san, and found out about the day of the incident as well.”

Yondaime gave a low roar in anger. I felt a pain as though the interior of my clavicle was going to snap. I gritted my teeth and thought of my next words. Hison reached a state of immobility because of her hip and abdominal pains, and probably didn’t have the energy to protect Yondaime, causing her to be stabbed. Then, after the incident occurred, Gotouda-gumi’s odd actions. Why didn’t they kill Yondaime?

There is only one simple answer.

“The person who was supposed to be stabbed was Hison-san from the start.”

While speaking such things, I didn’t dare to look at Yondaime’s face.

“Yondaime’s shoulder was slashed to protect her, but even so……”

You still couldn’t protect her.

Those words couldn't be spoken, and kept piercing me in my body. "Those are just your delusions."

Yondaime pushed me away and sat on the chair.

That's right. I just pieced them together randomly. However, such a truth cannot help at all. Can we say this to Renji-san? Impossible. That's just too heartbreaking.

"So didn't I tell you not to investigate as you like? Idiot."

Yondaime's words felt as though they were flipping my clavicles around. Would maintaining my original ignorance be better? I don't know, because Renji-san is troubled in his ignorant state as well.

Say, Alice. I probably can't be a detective anymore. Although I rushed out without telling you anything, I have no idea what to do at all. Should I tell something to that person who liked Hison-san very much? Or perhaps, I should give him a lie that is not funny?

"Even I don't know, so it's best if you know."

I leaned my back against the wall, and blankly stared at Yondaime's face. Those were the gentlest words that I heard from him up till now. I was ashamed, and wanted to walk towards the exit, but I could only lie on the back of the sofa.

I even thought if I should continue treating Renji-san as an enemy, going into a showdown, and getting both parties injured. Would that be better?

No, what am I thinking? Have I forgotten the words that I shouted at Yondaime? The T-shirt embroidered with the emblem is still in Alice's custody. It was just because of a frantic attempt to maintain the connection between Renji-san and I that I did such a thing.

I can't let everything end without telling anything, right?

"I'm not too sure about that guy as well."

Yondaime spoke faintly.

“We always fooled around and fought together, while the favors that we owe each other are numerous as well. But he’s a person whose thoughts aren’t clear as well.”

“But you became sworn brothers with a person that you don't know so well, and made a promise to each other as well. So you carried all the dirty stuff on your shoulders for a person you don’t understand, making such a stupid lie as well?”

“Just shut up if you know it!”

After I stepped out of the Hirasaka-gumi office, I did not return to Hanamaru Ramen, but went home straightaway. I updated the official website for the band, uploading as many happy words as possible to promote the large celebration held the next week. It was quite miraculous. Even though my mind was in such a confused state, I started to calm down when I was typing out an essay, and it won’t be a problem no matter how many lies I need to say.

It might be as Mika-san said, part of me is probably suited for writing essays. But even so, I don’t plan to take part in a humble job that requires me to lie forever as well.

After ending the updating of the messages, I lied down on my bed.

Alice has probably finished listening to the recording Hiro-san brought by now.

As for her, what sort of conclusion would she come to? She isn’t the Alice of the past anymore. Knowing the importance of stability based on ignorance, and knowing that the vengeance that Renji-san holds is actually a misunderstanding.

Should we tell Renji-san and hurt him?

Or should we stay silent and let him wither naturally?

I don’t want to hear either answer from Alice.

'Since you had already reached Hanamaru Ramen, you left without showing up. What were you thinking!? And you did not pick up the phone even though I called so many times! You are probably relishing the short time of wanting to stay on the bed, right!?'

Early next morning, I was awoken by Alice's furious phone call.

"…… Uuu. Haaa……"

When I was about to say something, I could only make unclear comments as I still wasn't fully awake.

'Can you at least use a language known to mankind.'

"Erm….. Is there anything wrong? —Ah, oof…… Sorry."

I was nearly scolded again. *Even though there's nothing special, you should at least show up as an assistant detective!'*

"Erm….. I just feel like, after listening to that….. Well….. It was hard for me to meet Alice face to face."

Just imagining that we would have to listen to the recording once again made me feel pained.

"No matter how one gets along with anyone, in truth, this will not decrease. It will only be slowly accumulated, absorbing moisture, and expanding non-stop."

"That's exactly what's making me feel pained."

"You coward. Even daphnia can tolerate water pressure and osmotic pressure, but what about you?"

So sorry for that. "…… I was wrong. I'll head over right away."

"M- Mmph, I did not tell you to come over."

Why are you calling me then?

"Fine, I feel bad troubling you as well. I'll just sleep for the whole day."

“I do not care, hurry up and buy a crateful of Dr. Pepper for me right away!”

So what do you want really? I finally remembered when she hung up that I wore the clothes that I went out with and slept until now. Uh oh, if I don’t hurry up and bathe, I’ll smell terrible. And the computer still wasn’t turned off as well. The screen was stuck on the page when I finished updating the blog.

There were already a few responses on the blog. There were some netizens who logged in while wearing the T-shirt as well. There were some comments on the page with Alan Garba’s photo as well.

The celebration is starting. The embers that I started were already spreading in the city, reaching an unstoppable state.

After bathing, I returned to my bedroom and took out the luxurious embroidered T-shirt that Yoshiki-san gave me. I was the one who started the fire. So indeed, it won’t do if I don’t wear it myself, huh?

The inner side of the embroidered shirt stuck closely to my skin that was just bathed.

I went to a familiar wine seller to stock up on Dr. Pepper, and went to Hanamaru Ramen right after that. When I finished parking my bike by the shop and was about to head to the kitchen backdoor, I met Ayaka, who was sprinkling water at the shop entrance.

“Good morning, Fujishima-kun! This…… Wow.”

Ayaka continued to stare at my T-shirt, and hurriedly spoke after staying silent for some time.

“Your shirt is so cool!”

What do you mean by speaking of only my shirt?

“This should have been made by Yoshiki himself, right?” Min-san added behind the portiere.

“Ehhh?! You know just from a glance?”

“That’s right. It doesn’t suit you at all. It’s too regretful for the shirt, since so much time was spent. What a waste.”

Shut up! What are the two of you commenting for!

When I appeared at the detective agency office, Alice, who was sitting on her bed, assaulted furiously after turning around.

“And I was thinking why such a magnificent T-shirt is floating in thin air, so it is just Narumi? After all, compared with the shirt, the sense of your presence is equal to zero, causing me to be mistaken.”

What the heck? Is laughing at my clothing together becoming something like a trend? I made a sour face and placed the Dr. Peppers from the crate into the fridge.

“Where did you steal the shirt from?”

“Yoshiki-san made that for me! So sorry, but this one is especially for my use!”

As I was quite annoyed, I carried five cans of Dr. Pepper to the small table in one go, opening all of the cans together as well.

After that, I sat at the edge of the bed, having a slight sense of shadiness in my heart while observing the response that Alice would give. In the end, she actually finished all of the five cans in one go. In such a small body like hers, which part can still contain two liters of liquid?

Alice piled up the empty cans like a tower and showed a lonely expression.

“…… You are indeed working hard.”

“Eh? Eh?” What are you saying all of a sudden?

“If it is just for helping Yondaime, it has long exceeded the extent of simply helping. It is the same even if one looks from an objective perspective, and would even have some sort of illusion that you might have another road other than becoming a NEET to choose from.”

“Erm…… Actually, you don’t need to treat it as an illusion.”

Never would I have thought that Alice would say such things to me. However, why is she wearing an expression like that of ice cracking?

“I would sometimes think so. Was tying you to the position of an assistant detective a wrong decision? Perhaps you can actually be another type of person?”

Why? Why are you suddenly mentioning such a thing?

“Erm…… As I didn't come yesterday, are you angry?”

“Not angry.”

“You’re indeed angry……”

“I am not! I am just having second thoughts.”

Just at my side, Alice kneeled down and pressed her hands on her knees, looking at a side in displeasure. On the other hand, I felt my heart ache. Why did I make her show such an expression?

“Sorry, I was wrong. Indeed, I’m always busy with the event, and as for Alice……”

“What does that mean!?” Alice flushed while her hair and voice shook. “I am not a little rabbit that will die when nobody takes care of me!”

“Ahh, mnn…… That’s not it, I don’t mean that.”

“That should be my line! Listen well, what I meant by having second thoughts is regarding me easily allowing a boy without strong mental strength to shoulder the heavy burden caused by the words of the deceased.”

Alice used her slender fingers to point at my chest.

Easily allowing me to shoulder the heavy burden caused by the words of the deceased? But isn’t that just my role? An assistant

detective just needs to stay by a detective's side—

Being tied to the position of an assistant detective? Does that refer to me? Is that really true?

I turned around to look at Alice's moist eyes.

"I probably……"

I chose my words carefully.

"I probably can't be a detective anymore. After this incident, I understood."

It seemed as though Alice's gaze was about to melt into the sea.

"Indeed, I'm not as tough as Alice. Whenever I encounter unfavorable matters, I would get flustered, and run in the bamboo forest by myself, causing myself to be wholly injured and bruised. I'm clumsy, and don't have enough foresight. However……"

I unconsciously gripped the edge of the bed tightly.

"As long as I can continue being an assistant detective…… Half or a third, although I don't know how much I can shoulder. Because…… Because even Alice can't completely……. Are you okay?"

Alice suddenly closed her eyes, using her forehead to ram into the chest part of my T-srhit.

"—Ouch! Alice?"

"What!" Alice's voice shook even more than just now. "Being so self-righteous. Thinking that you know everything, saying that you want to shoulder my burden."

Alice's words that were full of emotions continued to fall onto my knees, causing my skin to feel scorched.

"How thick-skinned are you? Even though you are so slow that you will not feel anything even if explosives are placed in your shoes. Stop being so opinionated. Saying something like half? A third?"

“E- Erm…… Sorry—“

A small fist was closely pressed below my clavicle. Alice did not raise her head and continued:

“…… With your narrow shoulders, it is only five percent at most…… But it is still better than none— I cannot find any other descriptions fitting of this.”

“Ah……”

My voice nearly shook in relief and joy as well. It’s better than none, it’s fine even so. As long as I can reduce the pain on the thin shoulders even slightly.

I supported Alice’s slight weight with my chest, listening to the inorganic noise ringing in the air-conditioned room, awaiting Alice’s next words. Waiting for her to shift the five percent to me.

After that, Alice pushed my chest away with her hands and raised her head.

“I have investigated the roots of the leader of Gotouda-gumi.”

“Nnn.”

“The said leader’s wife divorced with him five years ago and went back to her mother’s home, and is currently staying in a hospital for mental illness.”

“Nnn.”

“Since Gotouda’s main physician already passed away, there is only circumstantial evidence. For instance, the divorce was some time after Hison was killed, and the sounds that the ‘girl’ living next to Hison heard.”

But those are the truth, right? If not, Yondaime probably wouldn’t have made such a large sacrifice, just to hide the truth from Renji-san.

Thus, I gave another question. I think, this is probably that five

percent of mine, right?

“…… In Hison-san’s abdomen, there was child of the boss— Isn’t that right?”

“That should be so.”

Alice’s hands that were supported on my chest trembled slightly.

“So that’s why the boss’s wife aimed for her abdomen?”

There is no need to continue. I almost said so to Alice. But this must be changed to words. After all, this is Yodnaime’s pain. Even if he isn’t at the scene right now, we must still bear it with him together.

The thing that Yondaime wanted to protect, but was unable to.

And then? What should we do?

“…… Should we tell Renji-san about this?”

As I was really unable to find out the answer, I could only ask Alice the question. I thought in my heart, even she is probably unable to find the answer, right?

Alice shook her head while supporting herself on my chest with her hand.

“Regarding this part, I cannot—“

That moment, Alice widened her eyes, while the words that she was about to say froze on her lips. Alice’s small hands, the slender fingers, continued to touch— the band logo on my T-shirt.

“…… This thing……”

“What is it?”

Alice’s hand gripped the T-shirt. I sensed the body temperature that was originally used to maintain her own life seemed to have seeped into the material, almost collapsing me in uneasiness, and thus caught hold of her wrist. However, Alice flung my hand away, and

stood on the bed.

"…… S- So…… So this is how things stand."

"Alice?"

"I understand. I understand now."

Understand what? I swallowed the question. As I looked at Alice's green face, I noticed that something was being emitted from her body.

"We must inform him."

"…… Eh?"

"We must inform Hirasaka Renji of this truth. Yondaime is wrong. Even if it is quite a sorrowful matter. Sealing up the wounds, even though he would feel better like this— It is still wrong."

Alice squatted down, and used her hand to gently hold my shoulders.

"We must find Hirasaka Renji!"

When I walked down the emergency backstairs after leaving the detective agency, three silhouettes were gathered before the kitchen backdoor. The more surprising thing was, Hiro-san, Tetsu-senpai and even Major were wearing a T-shirt with the band logo printed on.

"…… I- It feels a bit disgusting."

My true thoughts that I couldn't conceal accidentally slipped out from my mouth.

"And you dare to say that even though you're wearing the same T-shirt?" Tetsu-senpai shrugged.

"Just wearing this on the streets is good promotions. Although

there's less than a week left, we're thinking of doing something to contribute."

Hiro-san showed his pearly teeth.

"I think, if we hand these T-shirts to the patriotic comrades that I know, and we undergo a shooting match at Shinjuku in broad daylight, it would probably be a large hit." Major seemed to be full of vigor.

"Please remember to take off the T-shirt when you're caught by the police……"

I sighed and sat on the second step of the emergency backstairs by Hiro-san.

"Did something happen at Alice's place?"

As Hiro-san asked while staring at my face, I was startled, and prepared to stand up.

"Why do you ask……"

"After all, it's quite rare that Narumi-kun looks full of vigor."

"Ahhh……"

Is it really that rare? That's true. And I would only seem full of vigor at these times?

I really wish to become a person full of vigor.

"Alice told me that we must find Renji-san."

She did not tell me the reason, and I'm not too sure what it was as well. What did Alice realize? And it was after she looked at the T-shirt.

The truth that we must tell Renji-san about.

"That's all?"

"What do you mean that's all? …… Um, yeah. That's all."

“Hmmm?” Why does Hiro-san look somewhat evil?

“Saying that we must find him. It’s easy for her to say, but he really didn’t have any movements recently.”

While showing a displeased expression, Tetsu-senpai roughly stuffed red bean ice cream into his mouth. His arm was full of bandages, band-aids and the like. Recently, it does seem like he doesn’t have any new bruises.

“So it seems like we’ll have to hide and wait on the big day? Although it can’t be certain if Renji would appear himself.”

“On the day of the concert, our comrades will gather all skills to form a strict guard. It will be so strict that we’ll bomb anyone that enters to death.” Don’t do that, idiot! Why are you planning to kill our customers!?

“Will they really make trouble on the day of the concert?”

Hiro-san crossed his hands before his chest.

“What does Renji want? We are still ignorant of this even at this time. Even though they didn’t need to make so many small problems, as long as they damage the electrical system or commit arson, the blow on us would be bigger. Them doing all this would only cause security to be more guarded.”

Although I don’t wish for him to say such unlucky things, Hiro-san is completely right. I used my elbow supported on the wooden stand to think of the actions that Renji-san took up till now. The results? He just assaulted each concert venue, and did made some small problems. Just that point made people curious about that.

No— Actually, there’s a stranger thing before that.

That would be judging that Renji-san was the main culprit from the start.

This matter started from the time he stole the T-shirts from the Hirasaka-gumi storeroom. Although I didn’t think back on this properly up till now, such an action was already strange. Because of

that, we found out who did that. Among the people outside, the only person who has the key is just Renji-san.

Why didn't he even plan to hide his identity? If he allowed everyone to think that only small fries were making trouble, that would make us loosen our guard even more. Since we already know that our enemy is their past leader, it forced Hirasaka-gumi to stay in an extremely guarded state. Making all of the underlings security guards—

"…… Ah."

I accidently made a noise, while the three raised their hands to look at me. However, I did not have any time to care about their gazes, and I pieced out a complete hypothesis in my mind, making a loud roar.

But what if this is exactly Renji-san's motive?

Assaulting each venue, causing the gang members to disperse. If so, of course, it would be harder for them to assault the live houses, but on the other hand……

I stood up and took out my phone. "Narumi?" Tetsu-senpai curiously called me. I dialed Yondaime's number, and with my hand full of sweat, I moved my phone to the side of my ear. Hearing the waiting tone that gave people a sense of emptiness ring repeatedly, it caused my heart to throb while I got short of breath. Nobody answered…… Please pick up, hurry up and pick up the phone. When I was about to give up and hang up, my phone rung in my hands once again.

It was Pole. Uneasiness condensed in my throat.

"— Aniki, Sou-san……"

My rapid heartbeat almost covered Pole's voice.

"Sou-san was attacked! Now…… He's in the hospital!"

Before I finished listening, I was already starting to run. "Oi! Narumi!" "What's wrong, Vice Admiral Fujishima?" I escaped from

the voices that rang behind me, and immediately kicked up the stand of the bicycle.

Chapter 6

When I reached the hospital, almost all of the members of Hirasaka-gumi were present, and occupied the corridor filled with the smell of anesthetic.

“Aniki!”

Pole noticed me first and ran over immediately. The bandage on his head was still seeping fresh blood.

The tough juvenile delinquents were like mice that had their nest trampled on, and were all looking quite haggard. I think my face might have looked even more terrible. When I thought about that, I couldn’t even answer.

“Ojiki is here as well!?”

Tetsu-senpai and the others’ footsteps rang behind me. Hiro-san drove and came over while chasing my bike.

“How is Yondaime right now!?” Tetsu-senpai questioned Pole while almost clutching on him.

“He’s in the ICU right now.”

“I heard he was hurt by a baseball bat!” “He’s still unconscious.”

“Blast, it’s all because of us……” “If only we were by his side—“

My balance disappeared as though it fell into a quagmire, and I nearly collapsed. If not for Hiro-san supporting me from behind, I probably would have fallen straight onto the corridor. I was brought to sit on a sofa made of synthetic leather. The chilly sense of the wall touching my back made me feel strangely comfortable.

Major frantically consoled the gang members so that they would calm down, and I could faintly hear him inquiring about the case. When Pole and Rocky returned to the office, they saw that the

entrance was wide open, while the interior of the office was utterly trashed as well. On the other hand, Yondaime was being assaulted in the study. According to them, it seemed like there were about five or six assailants. The injury on Pole's head was caused by a blow with a baseball bat when the opposing party was retreating.

"Hirasaka-san wasn't there. He ordered his lackeys to ambush him together."

"Those trash, if I were there, how could I have let them touch Sou-san!"

"Unforgivable!"

"If there wasn't an order……"

The voices of the gang members repeatedly sprang away from the borders of my inner consciousness and outer senses.

That's right. Yondaime stayed in the office alone, because all of the gang members were out to stay guard at the concert venues. This— would be Renji-san's motive.

Why didn't I realize this? Even though it was just a simple matter. Renji-san once said so as well, that he came back just to kill Yondaime. However, some part in our hearts— including me, and probably Yonadime as well— we underestimated him too much.

Thinking that Renji-san probably wouldn't directly assault Yondaime.

Actually, it was only an illusion reflected in a glass of wine. The ones who believed in that were the idiots. Renji-san probably took this point in consideration as well. I, who could not find out about this, am really a huge, incurable idiot.

We kept staying at the hospital until the sun set. Although the doctors and nurses told us to hurry back, not one of us was willing to leave. When we heard that the treatment had ended, although he was still in a state where visitors were prohibited, Pole and Rocky still insisted on visiting Yondaime, so we were just allowed to see him for two short minutes. His whole body was hurt, and there

were a few bone fractures as well. There were hemorrhages in his organs as well. His head was harmed as well, so he still hadn't regained consciousness. The doctor just coldly explained that he was still unable to speak, and still wasn't out of danger.

The Yondaime lying down on a single bed made me recall Ayaka from that time. His pallid face covered with an oxygen mask, his head wrapped in elastic bandages, his eyes tightly shut without moving. The aura of a wild wolf couldn't be seen at all.

As some of the gang members behind me were calling Yondaime, while some were agitatedly saying that they won't forgive them, they'll kill them and the like, we were thus chased out of the hospital.

"Tetsu-san, haven't you already found out the location of their hideout?"

At the dark hospital entrance, Rocky approached Tetsu-senpai and asked in agitation.

"Kill them all!" "Don't think you can live on after touching Sou-san!"

"Oi, calm down, you all."

"It's already come to this, and you tell us to calm down!?" "We won't hold back even if our opponent is Hirasaka-san!"

The angry roars of the gang members sounded exceptionally piercing. With heavy footsteps, I walked on the asphalt road that was still hot while I headed towards the place where I parked my bike. I stood up straight after clutching the handle with some effort, and I took out my phone after that. While muttering 'Report', I sent a message to Mika-san. To myself, who could still worry about the event at these times, I couldn't help but feel that it was laughable. However, Yondaime was the person in charge. I had an obligation to inform her of this. After that, I called Alice.

'…… Nnn. I heard of it. How is the situation?'

Even Alice's businesslike tone made me feel warm at these times.

“He still hasn’t regained consciousness…… The doctor said that he’s still in danger.”

’Is that so…… We were too foolish. I feel like vomiting when I see my own actions.’

After conversing simply for a while, she hung up.

But the miraculous thing was, I did not even feel a shred of anger towards Renji-san. That person just did what he should have done—That was what I thought in my heart. My anger was directed at myself. Kicking up the bicycle stand, my feet stepping on the pedals ached so much that it was as though they were going to fall off.

Where should I go?

I tried imagining myself holding a baseball bat, rushing to Renji-san’s place, and swing it directly on his head, but the warm wind dispersed such a scene. It’s impossible. I don’t know where he is, and I don’t have such power in me as well.

Or should I return to Alice’s place? Why not? Then I’ll become a true scum. Even though I’ve long decided that I’m staying by her side just to help shoulder a tiny bit of her pain. If so, how could I bring back the pain that I am unable to bear back, because of my own meagerness?

Think by myself, and decide by myself! While forcefully stepping on the pedals, I told myself that.

*

The first thing I did when I went home was to update the blog. *It’s on this weekend! The debut will be at Akasaka! For the audiences who cannot come to the scene, we shall update the blog straight from the venue, providing the wildest on-the-scene situation!* The words of advertisement that continue to flow out from my fingers felt disgusting. But this is my job, so I can’t just quit doing it. I couldn’t pick up the phone from Mika-san, while Hiro-san and Major called as well, but I could only pretend as though I didn’t see them. After all, if I speak to someone right now, I don’t know what kind of

things I would shout out.

As there was coincidentally a large number of requests for interviews on the day of the concerts, I sent timetables and various other data to them, and rearranged the schedule as well. Just like that, the date changed to that of the next day very quickly. When I finished dealing with all the work on hand, I stood up from the chair before the computer, and was finally aware of the stifling heat filling the room.

I opened the windows. A cold breeze suddenly came into the room, causing my eyelids to feel a prickle of pain.

Even though there wasn't even one star in the skies, the ground was bathed in light. Probably, at the other side of the globe, the sun is still illuminating the earth while pretending that nothing happened, allowing days to pass just like that.

The odd jobs done to evade the pain in my heart were all completed. Thus, I clearly understood that there was an agitation that was about to explode before my eyes.

Yondaime's face that was as lifeless as soil surface in my eyelids, and it was the same even if I didn't think of it deliberately. My stomach was in pain as though I swallowed mercury.

Finally, I realized the true identity of the heat. It couldn't be described by the emotions fear or dissatisfaction. The me right now is very clear that Renji-san was the one who caused Yondaime to turn out like this— Hating him, hoping for him to get a treatment similar to what Yondaime went through. Clenching my fists that were lacking in energy, I still continued to shudder.

It was the very first time I felt like killing someone.

Renji-san once said, in the seeable future, our friendship would be destroyed as well. He was absolutely right. As he said, it was instead in such a pathetic form.

I'll kill you the next time I see you. That should be my line. I'm killing you! You actually did this to my bro…… My fists recovered their

energy. It felt as though blood was going to seep out from my fingers. I must kill you. Renji-san—

Kill him? How?

The trembling continued to rise to my lips. I frantically bit it.

Am I out of my mind? What am I thinking? Having strength on par with Yondaime's, and owning violence that Yondaime does not have, facing such a person, what in the world can I do?

In my palms that my fingers were sinking into, the hate fell after being melted by heat.

The night wind that entered through the windows caused my ears to gradually cool down. Even my own heartbeat felt unfriendly.

I have never known that the emotion known as 'hate' can be so strongly glued in one's heart. So Renji-san kept such an emotion these five years? Even though washing it away with tears would make people feel much better.

I definitely can't do it.

Maintaining such a hate, using it as a blade.

I don't have any need to think of what I should do anymore. I am just a high schooler, and shared sake with Yondaime just because we have some connections. When the world over there shows its violent side, I can only cower, at a loss.

I sank my body onto the bed.

If there really is something I can do……

I think it should be staying by his side in the ward. I already came in contact with various ways of death, so I have already gotten used to it. The so-called getting used to death means that one is dying little by little as well. If Yondaime is really unable to come back after this, can the spacious room in my heart be forever locked up in its empty state?

Even so, I should keep staying by Yondaime's side.

After all, I have already gotten used to pain.

*

When I woke up the next day, it was already near noon. My mood was terrible. I even felt like throwing up, while my vision was still hazy.

With some effort, I picked up the incoming call from Mika-san.

'Is Sou-san okay!? Which hospital is he in!? H- Hello……!'

Oh yeah, I forgot to tell her which hospital he was in. As Hirasaka-gumi sank into confusion, Mika-san is probably worried to death as she couldn't get in contact with anyone, huh? I feel bad for her.

"He…… Doesn't seem to be too well."

'"How can this be?'

"I'm not too sure as well."

'What about you, Fujishima-san? Are you okay?'

Am I okay? What sort of question is this? However, I couldn't give any response. I'm fine— The depths of my throat moaned faintly. I'm completely fine, as I wasn't the one who was beaten up. If I never realized it at all, everything would have already ended.

'Well…… In any case, I'll ask our boss about the planning of the event that day. Fujishima-san, don't you push yourself, and please keep me informed of Sou-san's condition in detail!'

After hanging up, I suddenly felt relieved. I felt that I had already done everything that I can. So can you temporarily not bother me? Everyone seemed to have forgotten that I'm just a high schooler on vacation.

I'm already really exhausted, so can you let me sleep for awhile?

However, my phone continued to ring non-stop.

”I heard that we successfully tracked Renji’s phone. He called the Hirasaka-gumi office before the assault. Confirming whether Yonadime was there, perhaps?’

’Alice is currently analyzing his phone log and the GPS location. We can find out where Renji is within toda—’

“…… Is that so.”

His hiding spot had been found out. Why at such a time? After all, that person had been really careful, and repeatedly changed his phone, while the power source wasn’t always on as well—

Whatever, this doesn’t matter anymore.

’Are you okay? You don’t sound so good.’

“I wasn’t feeling good in the first place.”

’About Yondaime…… I think that isn’t your fault, Narumi-kun.’

Hiro-san’s words passed through the differently colored stove in my heart, turning into irrational emotions in the end. Although I gripped the phone forcefully, I still couldn’t suppress the words in my heart.

“Although I only lived for ten over years, I’ve already heard these same words for about five hundred times and above.”

I could clearly feel Hiro-san’s expression change drastically at the other side of the phone.

“This isn’t your problem, you’re not wrong. My dad often said that to me. However, that doesn’t matter anymore. It can’t help at all. We’re not undergoing a trial right now, so even if one says such words, will Yondaime wake up? Can we pretend he never got hurt? If I’m just a bit more clever—”

I used my fingers to forcefully clutch my thigh, and stemmed the flow of words after some effort.

What am I doing? Is there any use if I complain about this to Hiro-san? These are the true words. I really can't be cured anymore.

"…… Sorry."

My words were full of stutters.

"I don't know what came over me."

After saying that, I suddenly felt so ashamed that it was as though hot water was about to spurt out from my eyeballs. What to do? I should…… I should have asked something more meaningful.

"…… After that, how's the situation?"

Hiro-san seemed to be somewhat hesitant, but he finally spoke after struggling for some time.

'Everyone in the gang stayed in the hospital. I heard that they slept at the parking lot. What a bunch of idiots, right?'

Laughter that sounded full of bitterness.

'This morning, I went over to the hospital, and they were still there. And since they were arguing with the doctor that they want to visit, I went over to stop them. Just at that moment, Alice called. When they found out that they might be able to find out Renji's location, only a few people were left there, while the others all squeezed over to the detective agency.'

I adjusted my breathing. The gang that lost their leader and was continuing to struggle. Most probably, nobody knows what to do, huh?

'But there's a troublesome problem. If those guys know where Renji is hiding at, they might really kill him.'

To be frank, I'm helpless if you tell me all this right now as well. The members of Hirasaka-gumi are workers for the event as well. If they make trouble at such a critical moment, it will definitely affect the event. Even though I knew that it would turn out like that, I did not have the energy to stop them anymore.

Just let them do as they like. After all, blood had already been spilled. No matter wheter the smell on the body is washed off with rainwater or with more blood, the injury will not disappear.

Hiro-san told me that he would call me if he had more developments, and hung up after that. I prepared to clamber into my bed again. When I noticed a message from the advertising company, it was just when I was about to throw my cellphone back onto the bed.

— Please send over the bills. Things like the newest version of the time schedules, the duties of the workers and the like can probably be gotten only from Hinaura-san. Very sorry, but can you please send the above data over?

I sighed. Yondaime kept handling such matters alone. After all, he's always very obstinate with money, so he didn't dare to allow the others to handle them, I suppose? Apart from that, quite a lot of information was only in his hands as well. It was just because of that that the people around him would have a headache when such an incident occurs.

It can't be helped then. I could only pick it up at the office. After that, I'll treat it as though my job has already been done. As for the solution for the interviews and the blog, asking Mika-san to deal with it would be fine.

There was a small bloodstain at the entrance of the Hirasaka-gumi office. The black stains of blood even splattered on the stairs. Most probably, those would be Yondaime's blood dripping down from the weapon of the escaped suspect. I spaced out while supporting myself on the railing for a moment, and could even feel as though I could smell the odor of rust as well.

How long had he been beaten up? Even that person only has a body made of flesh and blood, so he couldn't do anything if he was surrounded by a large crowd of armed opponents. If the opposing party did an ambush, it would be even harder for him to escape.

It's possible that I might turn out like that as well. Such a thought suddenly surfaced as I stared at the bloodstains.

I should stop this job. After sending the paperwork to the workroom, I'll tell them this. Since the matter had already developed to this state, my presence doesn't matter at all. Yondaime can just stay in the hospital as well. If so, he won't be beaten up by a crowd of people anymore as well.

The steel door wasn't locked up. When I stepped into the office, I found that the electric lights were still on, while the air conditioner wasn't turned off as well. From the time the incident occurred, not one gang member returned. The sofa was toppled, while documents were scattered on the ground. The doors inside were open as well.

The condition of the study was even more terrible. The bookshelves in the pitch-black room were toppled and stacked together, squashing the cardboard boxes. The sheets on the bed were splattered with blood as well.

Only the computer on the desk was still unaffected, its monitor glowing in the darkness. An unsent email was shown on the screen. When I saw the familiar email of the recipient, I felt surprised from the bottom of my heart.

It was my email address.

Not even one word was contained in the email, whereas a large amount of files were attached to it. Account books, organizational charts, timetables, contact information and a table of things to do in emergencies.

I extended my trembling hand to the keyboard.

I felt heat on my chest, making me unable to breathe properly.

Of course, backing up important data is common sense. That was why he planned to mail the files to me, and he was assaulted right that moment. That's all, isn't that right?

I clicked the send button. Yondaime's last will flowed into my body with the speed of light through the electronic circuit. Such a pain

was different from the one that I previously shouldered. It felt like it would expand in my innards if I don't touch it, and would explode in my body in the end.

I rushed out of the office and ran down the stairs. When I reached the steel door of the third floor, I stopped. The scene, the sounds in my memories vividly surfaced. That's right, this is the place. The gang members were here as well. And then Yondaime said—

'If anything happens to me—'

Those words should have been a joke.

However, now that they are clearly resounding by my ears, I cannot abandon them anymore.

'— I'm counting on you to take care of these idiots.'

He picked up the phone when the waiting tone rang for the second time.

'…… Aniki? Is this Aniki?'

A voice as rough as a telephone pole immediately rang by my ear.

'I was really worried of you for suddenly disappearing yesterday! Hiro-ojiki said that you looked sick. Are you okay? Where are you right now?'

"I'm in the office. Where are you?"

'At Ane-san's place, of course!' That would refer to Alice. So they're still at Alice's place? *'Now that we've almost located Hirasaka's den, we're preparing to rush over there!'*

"That won't do. This is not the time to do such a thing."

'What are you talking about! Sou-san was beaten up like that, how can we stay put!?'

I could hear the gang members roaring behind Pole even through the phone. *We must kill him! Make him pay five times over! Send them*

all into the hospital! How can we stop just by beating them up!

My body heated up.

“You shut up!”

I roared furiously at the phone.

’— A- Aniki?’

Pole’s flustered voice.

“I’m heading over right away, and you all just stay put over there!” Without even listening to his answer, I stuffed my phone back into my pocket and dashed down the stairs.

I rode into the alley almost without braking. I saw about twenty burly men gathered in front of Hamaru Ramen. I jumped down from my bike, pushed it down immediately and ran over.

“Aniki!”

I was clamped in between Pole and Rocky, while the gang members around me gradually increased.

“Aniki, what’s wrong? Ane-san and Major are searching for Hirasaka’s hideout right no—“

“War! This can only be war!”

“Beat them up so much they’ll turn up like Sou-san!”

“We’re already prepared for the police to arrest us!”

“I’m telling you that you can’t do this! You’re all workers for the event, so if you’re arrested for acts of violence, the security that day will be—“

“Who cares!”

“We must let them know what’ll happen if they dare to touch Sou-san!”

“We can’t wait anymore, and we definitely won’t forgive them!”

“WHAT’S WRONG WITH YOU!”

I screamed, unable to suppress my emotions anymore. The gang members were all startled at the same time, giving me sharp looks without reserve. However, I did not cower, and continued:

“Don’t you know Yondaime gambled his all for this job!? Starting a

company, recruiting employees, thinking of a way to gather funds, bowing down to people everywhere— It's- It's nearly bearing fruit, and you're actually thinking of destroying all his efforts just for meaningless matters!?"

The gang members surrounding me paled, and my critiques continued.

"Why do you think Renji-san's phone could be tracked at such a critical moment? You were all deliberately baited. You didn't even realize this!? Think about it, if you make trouble while wearing the emblem, the event will definitely be cancelled! Why can't you understand even such a simple matter!?"

"A- Aniki……"

I used my shouts to cover Rocky's moans.

"Aren't you all bearing Hinamura Souichirou's name?! It's the same for me! You can't have forgotten about this, can you?!"

The faces of the burly men gathered around me gradually twisted, but I don't know if it was because of me scolding them or if it was because of their inability to suppress their surging emotions. However, I still finished my words.

"I am that person's sworn brother. That is why—"

Ahh, it's indeed because of the tears. My voice was engulfed by the surging emotions.

"Before he comes back, I'm taking charge of the gang. Stand out if you have anything to say about this!"

My voice spread with a sense of swollenness. My fists and lips continued to shake, while tears filled my eyes. I used all of my energy to stand in the center of a crowd of burly men, trying to glare back at the angry gazes of over forty men in bravado.

Sweat that felt strangely cold trickled down my back.

When I was stating my thoughts, a strange pulse flowed in my

limbs. Now that I already spoke out all of them, I lost all my energy, and felt as though I was going to be crushed by the silence.

Did I say anything inaccurate? Even if it's true, do I even have the right to say all this? After all, I'm just a powerless—

Pole's body bent into half. It gave me a huge fright, almost making me puff out all of the breath in my body, escaping from the scene.

However, Pole was not walking forward. He bowed down on the spot, his legs the width of his shoulders, his elbows on his knees, and he lowered his head after that.

Standing by his side, Rocky made the same pose as well. Like receding waves, the surrounding gang members bent down with their heads lowered as well.

It was a rite of men.

"— My apologies. I didn't know Aniki thought for us so much."

Pole's deep voice.

"We were too dumb."

"We nearly let Sou-san down."

"We believe in Aniki."

"As long as Aniki is here."

"We'll follow you forever."

After that, the gang members raised their heads, flames of vigor burning in each of their eyes.

"…… We're leaving our lives in Aniki's hands."

"Understood, in Aniki's hands."

"In Aniki's hands."

The voices spread.

The energy supporting my body nearly flowed out along with my sweat and tears, from my ears, from my lips, from my eyes. I supported my fists on my thigh, trying hard not to let myself collapse. That won't do. My bravado must continue.

"…… Nnn. I understand."

The voice that came from my parched throat did not even sound like my voice anymore.

"Leave them all to me. Thank you."

"I saw it all from the surveillance cameras. Your display was not bad."

Alice showed a speechless expression while sitting on her bed. Around the building where the detective agency is at, a few surveillance cameras that are able to inspect the surroundings were installed, allowing the detective to check out the situation outside on her bed.

Which means, the idiotic game of loyalty was clearly seen by her from head to toe.

"You are really a very special man. As long as your brain is filled with blood, you can reach the truth in the shortest distance for some reason. Why can you not do it usually?"

"No…… I didn't realize it myself……"

I hugged my knees while sitting before the bed, feeling the cold air from the air conditioner on my head. As I was too nosy, and forced myself too much, I was completely lacking in energy. When I think about it, it was actually quite scary. Facing Hirasaka-gumi that was somewhat famous as juvenile delinquents in the past, I could actually still criticize them like that. As Alice said, when my blood fills my brain, even I, myself, don't know what I will do.

No, actually, I know it. Like just now, I can only resort to such ways. It's just that sometimes, the worries of *'What should I do if I*

fail?' would disappear to goodness knows where.

"That is a power that you can take pride on."

Alice responded expressionlessly. But I don't need such a thing. It's not like I can save anyone, it's just that I can act quicker on decisive moments— No matter if it would end in happiness or despair.

"You are quite impressive, actually knowing that being able to track the phone signal is actually a trap by Hirasaka."

Alice's voice melded with the sounds of typing.

"I just thought of it all of a sudden, just to convince the gang members."

"You really got me. Are you seriously listing fraud syndicate as a choice for your future?"

"I'll think about it……"

I hugged my knees even harder.

"But that was really a trap."

I raised my head.

"Major contacted me just now. The location we found out from the GPS satellite signal was a short-term apartment. Over ten armed men were waiting there, but Hirasaka was not among them. What a devious man."

Which means, he planted his phone in the room, while he hid somewhere else?

I really couldn't connect such a despicable action with the smiling face that I was familiar with. Just because of that, I wished even more for a chance to speak with him once more.

"Thus, Hirasaka's true aim is probably this."

"……Eh?"

“The thing that Yondaime accumulated, the whole Hirasaka-gumi.”

In the past, Renji-san started the gang with Yondaime, and it grew so much that it had an influence on the city after five years— their companions and the gang emblem.

“I am thinking, he was probably planning to make them lose the head of the gang, dissolving it while it is truly decapitated. In truth, it should have turned out like this as well. The only miscalculation that Hirasaka made was— *you are here*.”

I….. am here.

Even though I couldn’t do anything, and could only stay here.

“But I think Hirasaka will probably not stop. He knows that Hirasaka-gumi is taking charge of the security of the concerts, so if he cannot bait them to attack, he will probably attack actively. It is impossible for him to lose the great chance of causing confusion on the day of the event, because we must still maintain our pride.”

I hope to talk things out with Renji-san once again. Telling him not to do this anymore. Even though I know his number, it couldn’t get through at all. What on earth should I do?

“It is unknown if he, himself, will be present on the day of the event itself. It is possible that he plans to allow his underlings to take action after this no matter if they are continuing their harassment or not, because it has been so up till now.”

I breathed out with my mouth, a long, faint puff.

“How can we allow him to do so? I will definitely drag him out.”

“…… Alice, what do you want to tell Renji-san?”

The detective still had her black, silky hair facing me. The light on her hair gently fluttered along with her voice.

“The words of the deceased, of course. Words that were accidentally eradicated.”

“You’re not planning to tell me now?”

“I wish to be pained only once as well.”

I thought in my heart, what sort of expression was Alice’s face that was facing the screen wearing? Hoping to be pained only once. Even if she tells me right now, I still cannot reduce her pain. Is that what she means?

Is that really that deep of a scar? Or is it because I’m completely usele—

I shook my head, flinging away the useless self-deprecating words.

“If you tell him…… It would mean even Renji-san would be in pain as well, right?”

“That should be so. And it includes you, and includes Yondaime.”

Even so, you still have to dig such a grave?

“The Hirasaka right now is like a rat in a hole, being unable to go anywhere. The request that I have taken is, bringing him before Yondaime. It is the same even if my skin might be scorched by sun, even if my eyes might get blind because of this. I must pull him back from the dark ignorance.”

The black hair finally shifted to a side. Alice turned around. In the eyes filled with sorrow, a luster, like soft moss covering old wells, was accumulated.

“That is why I am planning to unhesitatingly use despicable tricks as well.”

“Despicable tricks?”

“After all, there is still a captive in my hands.”

Alice’s hand extended towards the hill of dolls, pulling out that thing. It was a white T-shirt tidily folded. Hirasaka-gumi’s unfinished mental trademark. The important thing that was left by Hison.

"…… Can we really bait him out just by using this?"

"We are not going to use this directly. The bait must first be manipulated."

"But…… The main thing is, how are you planning to contact Renji-san?"

Alice kneeled down, her eyes at the same height as me, and she pressed my chest with her small hand. As though she was confirming something.

After that, she spoke again:

"What is your current job? You are not just an assistant detective, are you?"

The words spread through my body, along the chilly air, along the fingers that had the warmth of a body.

My current job.

Originally, I was just planning to accept Yondaime's request, helping him manage things related to the internet. But unknowingly, it got the support of numerous people, and in the end, I focused almost all of my attention on this matter, up till now.

My job.

I took out my cellphone and called Mika-san.

"…… Yes. Fujishima speaking. Sorry for yesterday…… Yes, okay. I'll send it to you together. No, the condition is still bad…… Yes, and then……"

As Mika-san still seemed to want to say something, I halted her words with a forceful tone.

"On the day of the event, I'll be in charge of the coordination. Yondaime told me to do so…… Yes. That's right. Anyway, I'll go for the meeting. Yes…… I'm counting on you. Yes. Including the updates of the website up till the big day, yes, that's right……

Every day, right? I'll be in charge of them all. No. That's fine. Please allow me to do so. Because—"

I continued after gulping.

"…… I'm in charge of the advertising."

After ending the conversation with Mika-san, I looked at Alice. We just nodded, as no words are required between a detective and an assistant detective.

"…… Is this Major? Nnn, that is correct. My apologies, but we still need you to continue the surveillance and spying up till the day of the concert. How many people are needed for the shifts? …… Three? I understand, I shall tell Narumi to arrange for this."

While listening to Alice converse with Major through the phone, I dialed Pole's phone number.

"Yes, it's me. That's right, please send three men to Major's place. And about the security that day…… I'm guessing that Renji-san will probably take action that day. Nnn. I'm going over to inspect things again. We'll need to rearrange areas for security…… I'm counting on you."

With our backs to each other, Alice and I hung up at the same time, and started moving towards our goal.

*

Only four days were left before the celebration.

Even in the evening, the heat of the summer day was still present. A colossal quadrilateral silhouette surfaced in the darkness, blocking the rays of light from the large building behind. Steel could be seen exposed from various positions of the building. This strange-looking building would be the famous live house largest in Akasaka, Tokyo.

Illuminated by lightings, all that could be seen before the entrance were people, people and people. The workers shouted their voices hoarse just to inform the guests at the very end. It felt as though the

heat of the crowd was going to form a cloud. Among the gathering guests, T-shirts with the band logo that I made could be seen on an indefinite basis.

I touched my chest. The T-shirt specially embroidered by Yoshiki-san for me and the other shirts, they were all connected.

The large screen at the entrance was playing a video of rehearsals on the stage. Although there was no sound accompanying the screen, it showed the sharp beauty of the Gibson Los Paul guitar that the main female vocal was strumming even more. The long black hair with two plaits that were like the tail feathers of flying birds danced under the light that was full of vigor.

The internet should be playing video clips similar to this as well. I wonder if Renji-san is watching, the trap that Alice set up.

The clothing that the main female vocal was wearing was just a white T-shirt that had a collar and cuffs with black material.

While feeling that it was unbelievable, I stared at the picture on the shoulder and side abdominal part of the T-shirt. Alice said that she would manipulate the bait. I wasn't told even till today as well. What did those words mean?

Why can she do such a thing?

However, I did not have the time to solve the question. It was starting. I clutched the leather box in my pocket and ran towards the backdoor for workers. What was kept in my pocket was Major's specially made multi-functional walkie-talkie. It was connected to the gang members positioned elsewhere and the NEET detective squad.

"It's starting." I reported into the headset microphone.

I saw the guests starting to move slowly with the corner of my eye, and I rushed into the door. When I entered the pitch-black corridor, I suddenly heard my own heartbeat.

'I found three enemies mixed into the guests.'

Major's voice came from the headset. After that, Rocky's voice overlapped.

'I am currently at the entrance of the hall. There are some familiar faces, including the ones who attacked Sou-san. Do we need to catch them?'

"No, you can only tail them. Don't make trouble at places where guests are present. I'm guessing that a few more of them came as well, and will probably gather at the restrooms or somewhere else. Anyway, we already knew that they would come, so just let them wander around."

'What if they make trouble as soon as they get in?'

"If it turns into a situation when guests are harmed, you don't need to hold back. You're among the security, after all."

My voice would still tremble. They won't do things that are so dumb, will they?

"I've already said that those people's target is very clear. They are not here to destroy the event. They are preparing to use the confusion of the concert to defeat the members of Hirasaka-gumi positioned elsewhere in the venue one by one."

Even so, we must still use them. In any case, in such a large event, security guards are absolutely needed.

"That's why we need to bait them up, surround them and defeat them all. Do not attack actively." *'Understood.'* Rocky firmly cut off the signal.

'Narumi-kun?'

Hiro-san spoke. He should be with the band members right now.

'Can I walk out of the lounge now?'

"No problem. Sorry for the trouble."

A row of people passed by the short passage for business use that

was filled with heat. The uproar of the audience was not with their voice, but in the form of vibrations. Just by touching the cement wall with one finger made one feel as though the whole building was a balloon that was about to break. Closely after that, clear cheers spread to us from below.

The ensemble of dazzling guitars , jazz drums and bass whirled the commotion together and stepped away after that. The opening song kicked off. My footsteps quickened as well. It felt as though boiling blood was directly filled into my heart. I opened the lock of the door at the innermost of the corridor. The person in charge of the live house reminded me a few times to lock the lock for the passage for business use, and the workers were asked to follow it completely as well. Because of that, I must do this job by myself.

Following my footsteps— he would probably appear. If he got the secret message.

I opened the last door. Pale rays of light, band music loudly played, a vigorous chorus, all of them assaulted me from the front. It was the side of the stage. Quite a few thick cables were fixed on the ground. Colorful spotlights were shone from the stage, causing ProAudio machines and guitars placed next together to form differently shaped shadows. There was a short ladder on the left, while in front of that would be another door connected to the audience seats.

No workers could be seen over there. I asked the party in charge to keep this place empty.

My gaze shifted to the rays of light. The cymbals of the jazz drums kit was dancing repeatedly, shattering the neon lights into fragments counted by ten thousands. And somewhere over there, the tall main vocal could be seen. With the white T-shirt, her long hair looked like the tail feathers of a flying bird.

“Major, I’ll have to bother you for a moment.”

I spoke into the headset microphone.

’Roger. Good luck for your battle.’

I removed the headset. Along with the song and the vigorous rhythm, blood filled my mind. I felt like crying. The illumination lit up at the same time as the song reached the interlude, and the surrounding turned into the South China Sea in an instant. The lingering aftertaste of the rhythm was continued by the cheers of the overwhelmingly enthusiastic audience.

I placed the headset unit on the amplifier by my side. I could even feel the slight virations in the air. I stood alone in the darkness, awaiting the cheers to descend onto the sand, turning in to sand, changing to mud.

— Everyone, thank you for coming today.

The unexpectedly gentle voice of the main female vocal spread through the silent air.

— I could only be here because of many people's help. Thank you very much.

Just at that moment, I heard the sound of the door handle behind me turning.

I stopped breathing, closed my eyes and counted to three silently in my heart.

— Songs can be spread no matter how far it is, it's great. It's the same even for that person who is no longer by our sides.

I breathed out and turned around.

Before the open door and the long, slender ray of blue light extended from the stage, there stood a silhouette. Step by step, he slowly approached. His goggles-styled sunglasses reflected the light over.

"What? Yer specially waitin' for me over here?"

Renji-san stood at the dead center of the pillar of light.

"I invited you here after all."

My answering voice was still indeed unsteady.

“I saw it on the net. The shirt that woman’s wearin’.”

Renji-san gestured behind me with his chin.

“I thought that it’s a careless invitation, but that thing is my important belonging. And I have somethin’ to ask ya as well.”

“Glad you can come.”

“Ya can actually say something like this when it’s already come to this. The extent of yer foolish kindness is quite scary.”

That’s true. I’m thinking if I’m a fool as well. Even though my companions and I were so terribly tortured.

“The matter that you want to ask— It’s regarding the emblem on the T-shirt, right?”

“Yeah.”

I took a step forward.

“Why is it complete?”

I glanced at the stage. The main female vocal was in a silent explanation to the audience. The logo on her shoulder and side abdomen wasn’t an incomplete picture that was like fireworks.

It was a swallowtail butterfly with a few layers that was full of vibrant colors.

That which should have already been lost—

“To be frank, even I don’t know, because nobody told me about this at all.”

Renji-san frowned.

“The person who asked you out actually isn’t me.”

“What are ya talkin’ abou—“

Renji-san stopped in the middle of his words, as a small silhouette hidden in the shadow of the neighboring amplifier stood up from the side of my feet, into the light.

Her long black hair slid down from her shoulders. A silhouette donning a furisode with patterns of pine dyed with black Edo Yuzen while holding a large stuffed teddy who surfaced against the light was reflected in Renji-san's sunglasses.

I was still quite doubtful about that. Isn't that a kimono?

As I recall, this petite detective wears clothes for mourning when she is preparing to tell the opposing party the truth when the case ends, isn't that right?

"First, I must erase your worries."

While holding my belt, Alice spoke to Renji-san.

"That T-shirt is a fake. It is not embroidered, the picture was printed on. I think you probably could not realize that from afar. At the end of the concert, the main vocal might take it off and throw it to the audience, but no worries. I have kept your most precious real one very properly.

In the darkness, Renji-san's expression that was blocked by the sunglasses couldn't be seen at all.

"Who are ya—" Renji-san hesitated. "So yer the detective. I just heard of it, yer a nasty kid with strange skills."

"I am not an ordinary detective. I am a NEET detective, the messenger for the deceased."

Alice's voice was extremely steady.

"Doing everything just to harm the living to uphold the honor of the dead, or to shame the deceased to console the living."

"Ya don't need to explain your identity. Where did ya get that picture from? That is—"

“I have told you, those are the words of the dead.”

Being interrupted by Alice, Renji-san’s face started to twist as he finally saw through it.

“I obtained it from the female most important to you.”

“How!? Hison was long dead—“

“She is still alive.”

The air that was supposed to be full of heat froze in an instant and cracked.

I bated my breath and stared at Alice, who was by my side. Her gaze raised, and met mine. Her hand that was gripping my belt loosened, and she touched my chest instead. Touching the embroidery of the band logo on my chest.

“This thing is the last key.”

Alice’s voice resounded.

“This web-shaped embroidery that looks like tatami is called chasu. It is a traditional embroidering skill that exists only in Korea.”

I gulped. Alice’s gaze returned to Renji-san once more.

“On the day of the incident five years ago, Hison was severely hurt due to her being stabbed on her abdomen. She was sent to a tight-lipped surgeon, and the surgery was successful as well.”

“What….. did ya say?”

Renji-san moaned. I unconsciously clenched my hand on Alice’s shoulder.

“Hison was saved. However, a few of her innards were taken out because of the sever injury. I am guessing that her uterus and ovaries were all taken out. Hison lost her bodily functions as a female, and her body could not move like before as well, while Gotouda paid a large sum of money to shut people up. The said ten

million yen that Yondaime allowed you to see was that sum of money. The target of the deposit was a person familiar to Yondaime, a real estate agent at Adachi, and the ten million were used to rent a certain building before the Kita-Senju station, and also as the deposit of one of the floors."

It was not hard for me to imagine the transparent smile that did not last long below the glasses.

"Hison could not continue her job as a pub lady anymore, but she obtained the shop that she dreamt of. She abandoned everything in her past, even herself as a female, and hid all of the memories that existed between you and Yondaime. Switching the order of the two kanji of her name, now— she is living on with the identity of a male."

Renji-san pulled his goggles sunglasses onto his forehead. In his eyes with light shining on it, I cannot find out what sort of emotions were contained in them, as my gaze was covered with something that was about to spill out.

Under the gentle smile, the true name hidden under wounds. Hison.

"She is still alive. You already know it now. Therefore—"

"Why!?"

Renji-san's voice pierced through the night.

"Why……? Then Sou, why—"

The end of his sentence was swallowed up by sharp intakes of breaths.

"Why, you say? All of it was for you and Hison. Hison's sole wish is for you not to know. Including the fact that she was someone's mistress…… And the fact that she was pregnant."

Don't say anymore. I used my voice that was barely formed to warn her. So what if you tell him about this? Nobody will attain happiness, isn't that right?

Then why?

“However, such a thought is just too disappointing.”

Alice stated in a chilly tone.

“I am planning to break the taboo of a detective. Words of the deceased, you say? Rubbish! Tarnishing the power that mankind chose just for a miniscule part of consolation, such a matter is not allowed. After all, we are still alive. Living on in the real world. If so, meaning in words can be transmitted any time. Should you reclaim your connection? Or should you continue to break your relationship? Those can all be chosen. No matter how painful it is, humans can probably accept and choose. No one has the power to erase those choices. Is that not right?”

I was suddenly aware of the pain in my throat and gulped, raising my head after that, because I noticed that Alice’s last words were not directed at Renji-san.

The door that was opened blocked the side of the extending light.

Renji-san, who turned around to look, saw the silhouette. The hair bleached white, the swallowtail butterfly tattooed on the bare shoulder, all of that froze at the point of intersection of the blue lights.

I was planning to run over, but Alice hugged me from behind, and halted me.

“Do not go. This is not the time for you to show up.”

“B- But!”

Even though his body shouldn’t be able to move, as he was in a coma.

“Sou……”

Renji-san softly called the name, taking off his goggles sunglasses and tossing it on the floor. Yondaime slowly stepped into the light with his back towards the door. How on earth did he manage to

escape the hospital in this condition? The shirt bloodied by blood was worn when he was assaulted. It should have been placed by his bed. Which means, he came directly here from the hospital?

In the darkness, I heard the sounds of Yondaime gnashing his teeth.

“You told him everything?”

The voice fell onto the floor full of cables. The wild wolf’s ferocious

gaze that still wasn't lost passed through Renji-san's shoulders, glaring at Alice.

"That is correct…… You are too late."

Alice's answer.

All of a sudden, heated cheers rang behind us again. Perhaps the time for comments from the band had ended? Yondaime closed his eyes. After shaking his head, he raised his gaze and looked directly at Renji-san's face this time. Among this, the two did not converse at all. Only charred air was left.

"…… It's really miraculous."

Renji-san spoke. Although he had his back to me, I could clearly see the sorrow in his smile.

"I thought that more things would fly over if we meet, like complaints, grudges, roars or the like. I wanted to live more tastefully, so I didn't wanna meet ya. Haha. But well, how should I say this? Ca—n't think of anything at all."

"If I take away your foul mouth, what's left? Won't there be only your bad habit of fighting be left?"

"That's true. No money, no women, no friends."

I thought, why are things so peaceful? Even though screams of the audience, sounds of feet stepping on the floor, applause and whistles kept ringing behind us. Why does the conversation of the two make my ears hurt so much, why is it so peaceful? Why doesn't the band hurry up and sing the next song? Singing a song that can sweep this loneliness away. I could only pray.

"…… I'm really jealous of ya. Will ya laugh at me if I say something like this?"

"It's not funny at all."

"That ain't wrong, but it's true. I don't have anythin' at all."

“My sworn brother standing blankly over there…… Didn’t you meet him as soon as you came to Tokyo? Seems like you still have luck the size of a pea left, huh?”

“That ain’t wrong.”

While listening to the conversation of the two, I almost cried out in Alice’s clutch.

“Why don’cha buy a lottery ticket? If ya win a hundred million yen, yer rotten life might turn for the better.”

“I’ll consider it. Can you tell me which betting centre I should go to, by the way? Which numbers should I buy?”

“Buy all of the numbers at the betting center, ya’ll definitely win like this.”

“Why are you still so smart?”

The words after that dried up completely.

Renji-san and Yondaime approached each other step by step.

“What should we do? I’ve already been too careless. It’s fine as long as I can get back my thing.”

“Even though it’s a gang that you founded yourself, the rules that you set. You, yourself, should stick to it more closely.”

“True. God, who will He support?”

I struggled in Alice’s clutch. Why? Why is it that only at these times, I cannot slip away from these slender hands?

“P- Please don’t do this! Yondaime is badly hurt!”

“Shut up!”

The roar of a wolf. The both of them raised their fists to face-height at the same time. Just at that moment, a smooth, explosive guitar solo rang. Lighting up turbulence that was released, it vigorously

spread mine, Alice's, Renji-san's and Yondaime's shadows on the floor and the walls. The rhythm of the music and the bass accompaniment overlapped, heating up the air together.

A clarion singing voice rang. Two shadows jumped at the same time and interweaved. I flung away Alice's hands and was planning to run over, but my knees were hugged from behind, and I fell down on my face. In my blurry vision, I saw one of the shadows falling slowly onto the floor.

The song rained down even more vigorously, slapping on my back and shoulders. The continuous beats of the drums that were like thunder, the bass movements that pounded on my whole body, the guitar music that was intertwining like a snake with flaming scales, all of them combined with the voice, corroding my world drop by drop to the finish.

After that, the standing silhouette shakily approached the collapsed party. However, he did not stop, and headed in the direction of the door after walking over the other's body. The silhouette on the floor asked:

"How many feints did you make just now? Two?"

"Three."

The silhouette standing by the door answered without turning back.

"Haven't you got worse at this or anything? How boring."

"Ya were too lacking in practice yerself."

"Is that so?"

I thought, who were they? My vision was long immersed in water, and was unable to determine who won.

After all, the two reunited. Only at this moment, they can return the most important thing that they exchanged together when they shared sake to each other— their words, and reaffirming it once again.

“Yer really an idiot.”

“I know…… But there’s no other choice. You probably won’t understand.”

“Of course I understand, idiot.”

The door connecting to the corridor opened.

“I’m seriously hopeless.”

Swallowing up the shadow and his unsteady footsteps, the door closed.

In the darkness, another shadow stood up, and picked up the goggles sunglasses lying on the ground. I wanted to say something to him. However, Alice tightly held on my hand, interrupting my voice.

Footsteps rang along the short ladder next to the audience seats. The door was opened, and loud cheers flowed inside.

When that sound was halted by the darkness once more, only the vigorous ensemble of music that rang on the stage remained by my side, as well as the temperature of Alice behind me.

Chapter 7

When the concert at Shinujuku ended on the fifth day, I couldn't even get up from the sofa with my remaining energy. The so-called event coordination means that there is an obligation to solve various problems that cannot be predicted. In the organization consisting of mostly newbies, the vast amount of workload couldn't be dealt with even if one has three bodies.

"Fujishima-san, today is the last day, right? Why don't we go celebrate? To celebration! The band members said that they want to celebrate with Fujishima-san as well!"

Rushing into the lounge, Mika-san said in excitement while flinging my hand repeatedly.

"No, I really can't do it. I have to go back to sleep. And also, I still haven't come of age."

"The shop is at the east pass! We're getting slightly late now, so I'll go over first!"

Did you even hear what I was saying?

"Then how about I go in your place?"

Hiro-san said while cleaning up the lounge.

"Ohh, I've already suppressed myself for five whole days not to flirt with them as we're on a job. But since its already ended, the ban is lifted. The girls in the band are so cute, it's hard for me to decide."

"What on earth are you thinking!?"

"Good, good. Hiro-san is welcome to go as well! I'll go book additional seats!"

Mika-san rushed out like that. To guard the innocence of the band members, I had no choice but to drag my exhausted body there just

to accompany him.

“If there’s free booze, I’m going as well. We’ve worked hard for so long.”

“Tetsu-senpai, you didn’t help out much, did you!?”

“I baited the people to the air conditioned room all by myself.”

“Wasn’t that just on the first day? On the others, you kept going to play pachinko, even though you’re among the security! I know everything!”

“Ohh— Ohh— Narumi, as expected of the person in charge of the system. Actually, it can count as a business loss.”

“Don’t joke with me

“Of course I’ll take part as well.”

Can the money lost in pachinko be counted as expenses? That probably won’t do, right?

Major reclaimed the walkie-talkies from the members in charge of security and returned to the lounge.

“Which means, we’re using Yondaime’s money for booze. We can’t see such a great party so often.”

“Major, weren’t you always mistreated as a primary school student each time at chain wine stores? Shouldn’t you just give up?”

Tetsu-senpai laughed at Major.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Actually, I’m already two thousand years old! And I have a student ID to prove that for me as well!”

That isn’t anything worthy of showing off to other people. I should say, so even such a person can become an adult? Duh. I, myself, will turn into an adult in law, although I have neither awareness nor resolution for this.

The restaurant that Mika-san reserved for us was a trendy restaurant with numerous stand-alone rooms. If it were to be just the band members consisting of female college students or Hiro-san, it does match them quite well. However, the ones who sat by my side were Tetsu-senpai, Major, Pole and Rocky respectively, making me completely speechless. Although the dishes weren't too bad, there was too little of them.

However, the sake seemed to be quite nice, which was why Tetsu-senpai was so happy.

"Why don't we get Yondaime some sake as well? We can order a whole bottle of Juyondai sake as well."

"Nononono. I'm telling you that he's an injured person. He said something like he was scolded to death by the doctors, his ward was locked and the like."

After all, he was a severely injured person who entered ICU for less than five days, but he slipped out of the ward, having a fight with someone else as well. If someone finds out that his visitors smuggled wine in, he'll probably be thrown into a ward with steel windows.

However, it's fortunate that we can be so busy.

That would be due to the fact that I didn't have the time to think back on Renji-san these four days.

Just like that, with the smell of barbecue and cigarette smoking my face, I counted the numbers of bubbles in my ginger soda while immersing myself in the commotion exclusive to the restaurant. At these times, it's hard for me not to me to think back on it. The highlighted hairstyle that had a sense of frivolity, the gaze blocked by the goggles sunglasses that was like thin needles, the evidently fake Kansai slang, the slightly hunched way of walking, the penguins and polar bears that we watched together, the sweet taste of the cola that we drank when we became sworn brothers.

That person, what happened to him after that? Nobody was willing to tell me.

Just like that, I had lost consciousness before I went home from the restaurant. I was already on my bed at home before I realized it. According to my sister, ‘A frivolous-looking man from god knows which age’ escorted me back home. I had to trouble Hiro-san to send me home, huh? Wait, doesn’t that mean he drove after drinking alcoholic drinks? No, that person was really just pretending to be drunk when he flirted with them while drinking wine, wasn’t he?

Oh well, whatever. I’m tired.

There was less than a week of the summer break left. However, I was still wasting my time lying on my bed a whole two days after the celebration party ended.

-

It was already the last Tuesday in August when the lethargy in my body gradually disappeared, and I was able to show up at Hanamaru Ramen once more. When I walked into the empty ramen shop that was in its preparatory phase, I saw a brand new red portiere spread out on the counter table, giving me quite a fright.

“Ahh, seems like it was made by Yoshiki for us free of charge. And it’s sewn on as well. It feels somewhat too flamboyant, but it’s still quite nice, right? I’m planning to use the new one from today.”

Min-san, who was cooking soup, spoke in a nonchalant tone. Somewhat too flamboyant? It couldn’t be described with these words at all. It’s a masterpiece that requires top-notch skills and timing. I checked out the texture with my hand. Similar to the T-shirt that was given to me, it was detailed embroidery similar to the webbed state of tatami. Using red thread that has slightly more luster than the clothing, the picture that seemed somewhat like embossment, taken from Chouju-jinbutsu giga, perhaps? The background of the portiere was a picture of frogs, eels and monkeys frolicking, while the words Hanamaru Ramen were sewn in the middle using white threads.

I leaned my exhausted body on the back of the chair, shifted my gaze from the portiere, and stared at Min-san, who was busy moving here and there in the kitchen.

That person should have known long ago as well. Yoshiki-san's— true name.

"What? You won't get anything to eat even if you keep staring at me. Even though you know we're in preparations, what on earth are you here for? Why don't you learn from Ayaka? Staying at home, doing homework for the summer holidays."

"W- Well…… Alice called me over."

"Then why don't you hurry up and get up?"

However, I still had something to ask.

I lowered my head. I took the chance of her shifting her gaze to ask:

"Did…… Hison-san say anything?"

"What do you mean?"

"For example, things about Yondaime…… or Renji-san?"

"Nope."

Is that so? I slowly breathed out. That's true. How could she have said anything?

Even so, Min-san extended her hand from behind the counter and pointed at the lower right corner of the portiere.

I noticed two foxes— No, wolves, in the crowd of rabbits and frogs, and let one of them wear a pair of shades in great detail. I felt as though something was surging in my body, and immediately folded the portiere.

So, this is that person's answer?

Without saying a word, folding everything together, and continue

playing that person's current role.

"…… You knew about it long ago, right?"

For quite some time, I could only hear the sounds of the soup boiling and the cooling fan spinning. Thus, I didn't even dare to raise my head.

I was afraid to see what expression Min-san was wearing.

"I knew."

Min-san's voice mixed with the moist air full of fragrance. I clenched my fists on my knees. Although I knew that it was a dumb question myself, I must still ask on.

"Haven't you thought of doing anything?"

"What does 'doing anything' mean?"

Min-san's voice that seemed somewhat displeased burned directly into my ears. After that, my fringe was suddenly grabbed, and I was pulled over to her.

"Listen well, I'm opening a ramen shop."

Min-san's furious gaze was just before my eyes. My voice shrunk while being stuck somewhere in the depths of my throat.

"I won't and can't do anything other than letting other people eat. Isn't that a given?"

I was attacked with a flick on the forehead that was visibly her going easy on me, and I was thrust out of the counter just like that. That's right, it's a given. After all, there weren't any other ways at all. We are all insignificant. Since we already can't take care of ourselves, we can only be in pain alone, survive alone, and die alone.

The main reason that I still felt that Min-san's words were cold was because I came in contact with it slightly, Alice's unanticipated passion.

Because we are still living on, we must make choices.

Those words were just like a scream from the sorrow of Alice's body. What in the world happened? In that small body, how much more darkness that I cannot comprehend is hidden?

Alice did not tell me the truth beforehand. She said that it would be enough for her to experience the pain once. Does that mean that the current me cannot be the one to share her pain as well? Even if it's only five percent, I still wish to help shoulder her pain— Are these thoughts only my own delusions?

It was like Min-san, who could only allow the others to eat ramen and ice cream. Does a so-called assistant detective have to obediently stay by a detective's side, accepting the words that she spoke because of her inability to tolerate the pain?

If that's true, it's just too sorrowful.

However, when I silently stood up, something flitted past the corner of my vision. I supported myself on the chair and blinked repeatedly.

The very edge of the counter. It was hung on one of the sake bottles that were tidily arranged. I picked it up with trembling hands. It's unmistakable.

"That's right, he came yesterday."

I raised my head to look at Min-san, while she smiled wryly as she stirred the souop.

Looking at the goggles sunglasses. I ran over.

"That annoying dolt just remembered the taste five years ago. Saying to me something like *'This definitely ain't Hanamaru's taste', 'Give me back that awful taste!'* and other idiotic stuff. And he even planned to eat ramen while wearing his glasses. He just wouldn't listen no matter how many times I scolded him, so I just beat him up."

And his bad habit of forgetting things easily hasn't changed at all, Min-

san chuckled heartily.

Why don't you give this back to him when you see him next time?

I rolled the goggles sunglasses on my palm, reaffirming its touch.

"…… Did he……"

"…… Did he?"

"Did he mention anything else? Like what he's going to do after this?"

"I'm telling you that he was just here for ramen. I gave him a bowl of specially made ramen. Apart from that, do you need anything else?"

I shut my mouth and clenched the goggles sunglasses.

"Too slow! What were you doing at the ramen shop? You should have came upstairs right away when you arrived!"

When I stepped into the detective agency, Alice's angry roars blew over along with the air conditioning. The detective wearing pajamas stood on her bed while frowning.

"Sorry…… I was talking with Min-san about something."

"Not much time is left until the train departs. What if we are late?"

…… Train departs?

"The Shinkansen line that Hirasaka Renji is going on. Departing from Shinagawa at four in the evening."

I widened my eyes.

"Why…… do you know?"

"He booked the tickets using his phone. I grasped it all. Fortunately, the object that we asked helped for has arrived, which would be the

item that he forgot. Why don't you take it over to him?”

As I couldn’t catch the package that Alice threw over, it hit me right in my face.

“What is it? You seem even more sluggish than usual. Your energy burned out after all the effort you put in, perhaps? If you wish to investigate the empty rooms for nursing homes, I can accept the request with an extremely low price.”

“N- Not really, I don’t mean that.”

I pressed the package closely to my chest and approached Alice on my knees.

“Well…… That time—“

Halfway through my words, the words bent, snapped, was heated up and melted, and finally reversed its flow into my lung. Even I, myself, didn’t know. What did I want to say? What did I want to ask? What did I want? Being stared directly at by Alice’s clear gaze, the troubles and doubts in my chest were squeezed together.

After all, I only didn’t want the cold, blowing wind and the splattering rain to snatch the temperature on Alice’s body, only wanting to stay by her side.

I just don't want to see Alice feel sad, seeing her swallowing her bitter memories alone. However, I’m so insignificant that I can’t even share five percent of her pain.

“It might not be convincing if I say this…… But I will do my best. Because I want to keep staying by Alice’s side. So that Alice can feel that I can stay by her side as well.”

Alice went into a daze for a moment, pushing away the hill of stuffed animals behind her, retreating to the innermost side of her bed.

“W- W- Wh……” Her face slowly reddened. “What is wrong with you, suddenly…… What are you talking about!? You are extremely odd recently! Is it because of your inherent NEET traits, your brain

broke down when your workload became too much!?"

"Eh…… Ah, no, sorry…… Well……"

"What about me? A- Asking me, w- what I feel about my assistant detective by my side who is as slow as plankton. You can actually be ignorant of this even though you were with me for so long, I am seriously speechless! To you, to you! That I am so—"

"…… So…… Erm…… What?"

As I was afraid of being pummeled, I covered my head with my hand, and I still felt a need to ask even though I was scared. Alice flushed, and as usual, empty cans of Dr. Pepper started to fly over.

"In any case, just hurry over!"

With her long hair fluttering, the NEET detective pointed at the entrance.

"What if you do not manage to arrive in time? Do you know how much energy would have been wasted then?"

I stuffed the goggles sunglasses and the item handed to me into my backpack together and flew out of the office.

I found the hair highlighted blonde at the waiting area of the number 23 line of the Shinagawa station. He leaned on the wall behind a shop, forlornly eating his train bento. Bells of train reaching the station and the voice of the announcer kept interweaving, while sounds of the trains on the railway rang non-stop.

"— Renji-san!"

I ran upwards along the stairs, passed through the gaps between the passengers pulling along luggage, and shouted out loudly. After raising his head and glancing at me, Renji-san refocused his attention on his bento. His speed of eating seemed to have slightly quickened as well.

When I ran to his side, adjusting my pace of breathing by supporting my hands on my knees, Renji-san snapped his chopsticks and flattened his bento box, walking over after throwing them into the rubbish bin.

“I was thinkin’ that Tokyo is really a desert, since nobody came to see me.”

The smile on his face was similar to that of the first time I saw him. However, there were red and green bruises on the two sides of his face. Possibly because I kept staring at him, Renji-san covered his face with his hands after noticing it.

“Ahh, about this? Narumi, ya probably saw the right one huh? It was Sou’s fist. The left was given my Min-san. I’m not even a Christian— Just thinking that my present for coming to Tokyo is these makes me want to cry.”

It felt like a rough flow of breath was stuck in my lungs.

“That guy, even though he was just a beaten up person, in the end, how were his fists? I underestimated him. I forgot how many wins and losses we had. If I lost more than I won, I feel even more like cryin’.”

I asked hesitantly:

“What are you going to do after this?”

“I’m thinkin’ of hidin’ near Osaka. It feels more comfy.”

Renji-san smiled with his teeth showing, and immediately frowned because of the pain on his face.

“Didn’cha beat up my underlings half to death at Akasaka? Actually there was a superviser from Yanagihara-kai among them, and I could only run away thanks to ya. Seriously, my personality is unsuited for paying back my debts steadily.”

“Won’t…… it be better if you just stay in Tokyo? If all of us help out, your debts will probably be……”

“I must take responsibility.”

He showed a gaze as though he was correcting me, and since he wasn’t wearing shades to block it, I couldn’t continue to respond.

“There’s no difference. Didn’t I tell ya before this? It’s enough that I could meet Narumi. Though the panda ain’t there anymore, we still saw penguins and polar bears. And also, the band’s songs ain’t bad as well. I’ll definitely buy their CDs if they’re out. I stayed in Tokyo for two months. Compared with my useless life, I already got a lot. Although I completely lost my sunglasses and my friends, and the woman that I once loved. So when ya think about it……”

I really couldn’t bear to continue listening. Because of that, I extended my hand into my backpack, taking out the goggles sunglasses. After that, Renji-san’s eyes widened.

“…… Ah— Ahhh— So it was at Hanamaru? So I left it over there? Rea—lly, thank ya. I’m saved.”

Renji-san’s eyes were hidden under the black glasses of the goggles sunglasses yet again.

“No.”

I shook my head weakly. I just think I have more to help out with, but that would probably be just my own delusions. Every one of us can only be in pain alone, survive alone, and die alone. If we come in contact with each other because of certain occurrences, how can we do anything for the others? Just the useless frame of ourselves was more than we can handle.

The last thing that the dumb assistant detective could do, was only to be an errand boy.

I took out the paper package and handed it to Renji-san.

“A present?”

“No, I heard that you forgot this as well.”

Renji-san opened the package. The wind that blew on the station

platform all of a sudden blew the paper packaging open. In the nick of time, his fingers caught the contents in the package, and then, pure white clothing material waved along the wind.

It was a T-shirt. With white background, only its collar and cuffs were black. There were detailed layers of embroidery on the shoulders and side abdominal part of it, which would be the emblem of Hirasaka-gumi. It wasn't just scattered fireworks anymore, but a swallowtail butterfly soaring in the skies.

I understand now, so it's such a thing. Alice asked Yoshiki-san to do this, I suppose?

"I forgot even about this."

Renji-san's smile was only on his mouth this time.

"When we decided on this emblem, Hison said that she wanted to help do embroidery of this. It's just that I was too poor that time, so there's just this one T-shirt."

The moist voice seeped into the T-shirt along Renji-san's fingers.

"So I just asked her to sew it on bit by bit when I went to hang out at the apartment, but in the end, Hison……"

While speaking hesitantly, Renji-san's face sank in a shadow. I tried to give him a smile and shook my head.

"Until its completion, five years had passed."

Renji-san responded with a forced smile as well.

"That's right. Maybe she had a crush on me—"

He stopped halfway through his words. Renji-san covered his nose with the T-shirt.

"…… Sheesh. So it wasn't Hison who finished the remaining part?"

I shook my head in puzzlement.

“It’s full of the smell of anesthetics. If you see that idiot after this, remember to tell him to be less restless in the ward.”

“Ah……”

My throat was burned by tears.

I felt that it was quite unfair that only Renji-san was wearing sunglasses. Even though he was in tears, when he had his back on the Shinkansen that just arrived and was leaving me step by step, it was like— he looked like he was just smiling.

An intrusive wind remained. Even after the train left, I still grabbed onto the thick railings by the railway, waiting for my flow of tears to be stemmed. The sunlight was reflected from the walls of the building, scattering colorful particles of light on my wet eyelashes. The scene that came into my view felt like everything was going to be burnt into the sunny skies, and it was in an afternoon with dazzling sunlight in August.

Afterword

The last male panda in Japan, Rin Rin, died at the Ueno zoo a month and a few days before the third episode of this series was released— the end of April 2008.

As it can be said that I'm living a life with no chance of using the television, I never found out that such a thing actually happened for nearly a year. That might be because I'm not particularly interested in black and white pandas. When I went to the Ueno zoo two years ago, I was probably standing behind the children on the glass of the panda hall who were looking at the still-present Rin Rin, but I have no memory of it at all right now. In my mind, there is only the happy look of a small panda shaking its fluffy tail, walking here and there under the shade.

In any case, when I found out about his heath, it was coincidentally the time when I was writing the forth episode, and I still can't recognize this truth. Although I say that I'm uninterested in it, in my subconscious, I still think that pandas are indistinguishable from Ueno. Besides, there are still panda statues at the Ueno station, while the names 'Panda Pass' and 'Panda Bridge' and the like are still kept.

They're guides for people to think back on their memories one day, perhaps? To keep a certain place for certain people, the most important thing is to give it a name, and continue to treasure it.

The content of the four books in the Kami-sama no Memo-chou series are stories similar to this. To treasure the places named for a certain person, until that person returns— they are stories like that. If everyone can use this chance to look back in detail, I think it's not hard to notice the theme lying under the story.

After my previous series was complete, I once discussed with my editor about my next work. As there was already two or three new ideas, I originally planned to write a brand new series, but he told me this in the phone instead—

‘Remember to think about the contents of Kamimemo 4 as well!’

As I’m a classic Japanese who just can’t say no, I actually answered like this: “Then I’ll send a few proposals over including Kamimemo 4.”, when I actually never thought of continuing.

I thought to myself: ‘Whatever, let’s just send them the proposals for the new series, and it’ll be fine as long as one gets through’

However, things didn’t go as I expected. When I sat before my desk, the new proposals that I was originally confident of completely disappeared, and could not be given form. When I came to my senses, I realized that my mind was filled with Narumi, Alice, Yondaime and ‘Him’ when I was staring at the blank document.

After that, I took out the first novel and flipped open the 215th page.

Up till now, the memory is still fresh in me. When I was writing Yondaime’s lines, I did indeed think of ‘him’— the story of ‘him’ parting with Yondaime, and not knowing if I could write the story that must be faced, the story of ‘his’ reunion with Yondaime.

Thus, I kicked away the new proposals that were in my mind, and completed the main structure of this story. I planned to write the proposal for Kamimemo 4 later, but it was sent to my editors the earliest instead.

In the end, as you can see, of course, it passed.

Probably because the place named for Yondaime and ‘him’ still exists in my editor’s heart— and in my heart as well? After all, this series has stories just like this.

Although I’m speaking somewhat triumphantly, actually, I just thought of the speech above just now, ramblings that I thought of after that. If any reader really flipped through the previous books because of my words, I’m so sorry. Although I wasn’t really ‘deliberately spouting nonsense about the main theme of the story in the afterword of the forth book’, my illness of rambling on hasn’t seem to be cured, and I actually did it for two pages, speaking as

though it's really true…… If anyone throws the book directly on the wall after reading the afterword, I can't have any complaints as well.

Although I, who kept playing the role of the boy who cried wolf, might not be trusted after this anymore, the part regarding 'him' is actually true. I kept planning to write this from before, and I finally completed my task, so I really have mixed feelings about this.

It feels like I should apologize for many things, so please allow me to express my most sincere apology for making everyone wait for a whole year. As for what I did in this period of time, people who once read my previous works should have known that I completely ignored kamimemo, and went to write other stories. Very sorry.

Speaking of which, regarding the second hand shop that appeared a few times in this story, there are some stories that will be released along with the novel as drama CDs.

This is the longest afterword that I have written in my whole life. Inavoidably, I've brought various troubles to my editor, Yuasa-sama, when I was writing the drafts of the story, and delayed the deadline of other short works, so I'm expressing my deepest apology over here. I'll have to thank Kishida Mel-sensei for creating beautiful illustrations for me in his business. Apart from that, NoSeul-ki-sensei helped me out as the translator for the Korean version when I was gathering information, so please allow me to use this chance to express my deepest gratitude.

May 2009 Sugii Hikaru